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The Spiritual in Islamic Calligraphy: A Phenomenological Approach to the Contemporary Turkish Calligraphic Tradition

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to highlight the relevance of the spiritual dimension of Islamic calligraphy, focusing on the Turkish contemporary calligraphic tradition. Academic literature in the field has been dominated by the tendency to focus on the objects produced by artists, neglecting their personal experience and understanding of the art. Using a phenomenological perspective, I give voice to calligraphers I met in Istanbul and Konya, letting emerge their views on issues related to the relationship between art, religion and spirituality. I explore several themes that have arisen from the interviews I conducted with fifteen exponents of the contemporary tradition, organised as a journey from the most material aspects to the most abstract ones. The exploration of these themes starts with the symbolism hidden behind physical calligraphic tools, moving to the analysis of the symbolism of the point and the letters, elementary forms of the calligraphic creations. The bodily dimension has been taken into consideration, showing how the control of the body is an essential aspect of the calligraphic practice. The art can be conceived as a pathway requiring the development of several moral qualities and virtues, all necessary to improve both the artistic capabilities and the spiritual maturity of the practitioner, until the achievement of the authorisation to teach the art. Once a calligrapher reaches the license and the mastery of the art, they bear the responsibility of transmitting the art to others. Furthermore, they become agents of remembrance, portraying in the most beautiful manners the verses of the Quran in social religious spaces, as in mosques, or on calligraphic panels acquired by individual collectors or museums. Since their artwork focuses on representing religious materials, including the remembrance of the attributes of God and of Prophet Muhammad, their art is considered an act of worship. Finally, I investigate what the meaning of Divine Beauty is in Islamic calligraphy, presenting the perspectives of Turkish calligraphers and analysing the connections between the artistic form and the meaning of the contents of specific calligraphic works. In conclusion, I have not limited my analysis to the formal aspects of the art, rather I have highlighted the existential dimension of a complex

practice which connects together several aspects of the human being, including the spiritual dimension. Thus, the traditional stream of Turkish contemporary calligraphy can be seen as a full manifestation of a culture, a lifestyle and a religion.

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In this work I used words and concepts from Arabic and Turkish, according to the context. Arabic terms are transliterated according to the rules of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Terms in Turkish are rendered in modern Romanised Turkish orthography. Words that entered into common English have not been transliterated. For instance, I used Allah instead of Allāh, Quran instead of Qurʿān, Muhammad instead of Muḥammad, Sufi instead of ṣūfī.

Every translation provided from the Quran, has been taken from Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: Harper One, 2015.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to highlight the relevance of the spiritual dimension in the Turkish contemporary calligraphic tradition. Academic literature in the field has been dominated by the tendency to focus on the objects produced by artists, often neglecting their personal experience and understanding of the art. Using a qualitative research approach coupled with a phenomenological perspective, I give voice to fifteen calligraphers I met in Istanbul and Konya, letting *their* views emerge on issues related to the relationship between art, religion and spirituality.

The rationale behind the choice of the calligraphers that I have interviewed, consists in the fact that, as I will demonstrate in the first chapter, they are among the most important exponents of Islamic calligraphy, not only in Turkey, but also in the entire world. For instance, some of those calligraphers won several prizes at international calligraphic competitions, while others have been the judges of those competitions. Moreover, they represent a direct and uninterrupted continuation of the Ottoman calligraphic tradition, which is based on the direct transmission of teachings from a master to a disciple. All the calligraphers that I have interviewed belong to a heritage which connects them to the originator of the Ottoman tradition in the fifteenth century.

The themes that I will explore emerged from answers to several questions (see Appendix D), all ascribable to one fundamental question: is calligraphy only a technical art, or does it engage the spiritual existential dimension? Answering the multifaceted implications of this question, the calligraphers presented to me their views on multiple aspects of their art, and of their lives. I identified the main themes that have arisen from the interviews I conducted, and I organised these themes as a journey from the most material aspects to the most abstract ones.

In the opening sections of this work, I will first briefly introduce the history of Islamic calligraphy, the literature devoted to the investigation of its spiritual dimension, and the art of penmanship in the contemporary world. Secondly, I will present the methodology that I have adopted conducting my research, together with

its philosophical foundations, and its detailed application to the fieldwork that I have carried out in Turkey. Finally, I will present an overview of the seven themes that I will analyse in depth in this work. A specific chapter has been devoted to the exploration of each and every theme.

Islamic Calligraphy and the Spiritual

Islamic calligraphy possesses a high status among Islamic arts, because of its direct connection with its religious purpose. From the dawning era of Islam, calligraphy has had the important task of conveying, in the most beautiful manners, the verses of God revealed in the Quran. According to Nasr 'Islamic calligraphy is the visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities (*al-ḥaqā'iq*) contained in the Islamic Revelation' and 'provides the external dress for the Word of God in the visible world'.[1] For believers, the charming verses of the Quran suggest emotions of awe and beauty and possess a sort of spiritual power (*baraka*) which helps human beings remember their Creator as the source of life, goodness and spirituality. Islamic calligraphy has transposed on a visual plane these emotions. It has also developed an artistic *scientia*, conferring to letters exact proportions, aiming at rendering a spiritual sense of beauty, perfection and wonder.

Referring to the art of penmanship, I decided to use the term 'Islamic' instead of 'Arabic'. The Arabic script has been used for writing down the text of the Quran from the early period, and for that reason its importance cannot be overemphasised in the Islamic lands. From this perspective, Arabic can be considered 'the instrument of materialisation and transmission of a message identified with the Divine Word' and since 'this script permitted, among the members of the first Muslim community, the precise conservation of the letter of the revelation, […] facilitating its study as well as its memorisation, obtained a sort of "sacred character".'[2] The Arabic language

[1] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1987), 18.
[2] J. Sourdel-Thomine, Ali Alparslan, and M. Abdullah Chaghatai, 'Khaṭṭ', ed. P. Bearman et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* 4 (1997): 1113; Franz Rosenthal, 'Abū Ḥaiyān Al-Tawḥīdī on Penmanship', *Ars Islamica* 13 (1948): 1–30.

became the religious language of Islamicate civilisations.[3] Moreover, parallel to the expansion of the Empire, the Arabic script became the script of several other languages, including Persian and Turkish. For that reason, the calligraphic traditions which blossomed in those lands cannot be strictly defined as 'Arabic', since they included works on poetry, for instance, written with the use of the Arabic script, but in Persian or in Turkish respectively. Thus, the term 'Islamic' seems to me to acquire a more universal connotation, referring to the leading cultural and religious character of Islamicate civilisations.

An Introduction to Islamic Calligraphy

In order to understand Turkish contemporary calligraphy, it is necessary to shed some light on the development of the art of penmanship from its dawning era. The styles which flourished during that time profoundly influenced the following development of calligraphy in Anatolia, which, to some extent, can be described as a subsequent refinement and sophistication of the initial art. The calligraphic styles used in the Ottoman period and in the Turkish contemporary calligraphic tradition, are rooted in the styles developed in the present-days Iraq during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and in Persia during the fifteenth century.

Archaeological and palaeographical research has attested the existence of the Arabic script, before the coming of Islam, at least from the third century C.E., with Nabataean monumental inscriptions.[4] Scholars have described the early Arabic script as a later form of development of the Nabatean script.[5] Subsequently, during the seventh and eighth centuries, the Arabic script developed in parallel to the

[3] Following the historian Hodgson, I consider Islam not as a unique and monolithic entity, but as a series of cultural relations. For this reason, I prefer to use the term 'Islamicate civilisations' instead of 'Islam'. From now on, when for the sake of simplicity I will refer to 'Islam', I will mean 'Islamicate civilisations'. See Marshall G. S Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

[4] John F. Healey and G. Rex Smith, *A Brief Introduction to the Arabic Alphabet* (London; Berkeley; Beirut: Saqi, 2009), 52–55; M.C.A. Macdonal, 'Ancient Arabia and the Written Word', in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, ed. M.C.A. Macdonal, vol. 40 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010), 5–27.

[5] See M.C.A. Macdonal, 'ARNA Nab 17 and the Transition from the Nabataean to the Arabic Script', in *Philologisches Und Historisches Zwischen Anatolien Und Sokotra: Analecta Semitica In Memoriam Alexander Sima*, ed. Werner Arnold et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 217.

blossoming of Islam. Different and more sophisticated religious, commercial, and administrative needs during the Umayyads (660–750) required the language to evolve, introducing, for instance, points and other diacritical marks to better identify letters. Historical evidence shows that the Umayyad script, called Hijazi, was in use during the late seventh century and the early eighth century.[6] The Hijazi was used in the earliest manuscripts of the Quran on minimally decorated parchment, and with formal characteristics similar to those of the Christian Syriac scribal tradition.[7] Hijazi script is characterised by a relatively primitive orthography and is comparable to a handwriting slanting to the right, without following any specific geometric proportions in the shape of the letters.[8] During the eighth century, the more exact and angular Kufic script became predominant in Quranic manuscripts.[9] Kufic was subsequently replaced by new curvilinear styles, but continued to be used in monumental inscriptions and for the specific purpose of copying the Quran. Notwithstanding its formal rigor and the possibility to be exactly reproduced, its readability was far to be straightforward, as evinced by the lack of a comprehensive diacritical system, and by some oddities as the presence of disjoined letters, which sometimes makes the reading possible only for those who know already what it is written. Kufic, with some modifications and innovations in style, continued to be the foremost script used for copying the Quran, even after the tenth century, during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258).[10]

During the ninth and tenth centuries, the broad diffusion of paper contributed to the development of the art of penmanship.[11] However, the reasons behind the evolution of calligraphy are not only technical, but also historical. Intelligently, Tabbaa shows that the political need of the ‘Abbasid caliphs, who were under attack by heterodox Shīʿites groups, is linked to the need of a canonisation of the text of the

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[6] Alain George, *The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* (London; Berkeley: Saqi, 2010), 27–34.
[7] George, 52–53.
[8] George, 31–34, 40–52; François Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to the 10th Centuries AD*, vol. I, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (New York: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1992), 27–33.
[9] Healey and Smith, *A Brief Introduction*, 85–89.
[10] Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*, I:34–183.
[11] Jonathan M. Bloom, ‘Revolution by the Ream: A History of Paper’, *Saudi Aramco World* 50, no. 3 (1999): 26–39.

Quran: the Islamic text had to be presented in a clear and readable way, leaving no room to other alternative interpretations.[12]

Ibn Muqla (d. 940), was a vizier and calligrapher under three ‘Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad: al-Muqtadir (reigned 929–932), al-Qāhir (reigned 932–934) and al-Rāḍī (reigned 934–940). He lived in a period of great intellectual ferment, in the fields of mathematics, mysticism, philosophy, religious sciences.[13] He elaborated a system of proportioned script, which calculates the proportions of each section of every Arabic letter, measuring every part through the dot traced by the reed pen and, when the letter is in its isolated form, inscribing each letter into a circle.[14] On the one hand, this system seems to be an extension of the geometrical care of Kufic; on the other hand it represents a break with the past in terms of the predilection of the mundane cursive scripts used in chancery in place of the monumental, angular and sacred Kufic. The system was based on the practice of measuring letters in points and on ‘giving each letter a proportional relation (*nisba*) to the *alif*’.[15] No authentic specimens of Ibn Muqla’s works have survived until nowadays, but in the *Risālat al-khaṭṭ wa’l-qalam* attributed to him, he lays down a system of proportional writing based on the principles of straightness (*saṭḥ*) and roundness (*dawr*).[16]

As far as the styles of calligraphy are concerned, they emerged from a vast existent number of styles. Ibn Muqla systematised and codified the so-called *al-aqlām al-sitta* (the Six Pens). However, in the encyclopaedic work by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995 or 998), al-Fihrist, twenty-six different calligraphic styles have been enlisted, some named by their geographical place of origin, some by their outer characteristics.[17] Among the numerous pre-existent cursive styles mentioned by al-Nadīm, Ibn Muqla choose and codified only six styles, which have also been adopted

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[12] Yasser Tabbaa, ‘The Transformation of Arabic Writing: Part I, Qur’ānic Calligraphy’, *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991): 141–42.
[13] Ahmed Moustafa and Stefan Sperl, *The Cosmic Script: Sacred Geometry and the Science of Arabic Penmanship*, vol. 1 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 106–105.
[14] Ahmed Moustafa and Stefan Sperl, *The Cosmic Script: Sacred Geometry and the Science of Arabic Penmanship*, vol. 2 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).
[15] Tabbaa, ‘The Transformation I’, 122.
[16] Hilāl Nājī and al-Ḥasan Ibn-‘Alī Ibn-Muqla, *Ibn-Muqla: khaṭṭāṭan wa-adīban wa-insānan ma‘a taḥqīq risālatihi fi ’l-khaṭṭ wa-’l-qalam* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu’ūn al-T̲aqāfīya, 1991).
[17] Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist: A 10th Century AD Survey of Islamic Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge ([np]: Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc.; Chicago: Distributed by KAZI Publications, 1998), 6–22.

by the Ottoman calligraphic tradition: *thuluth*, *naskh*, *muḥaqqaq*, *rīḥān*, *tauqīʿ*, *riqāʿ*.[18]

Thuluth is considered the mother style of Islamic calligraphic, upon which all the other styles have been based, and it has been applied especially on monumental inscriptions and on majestic headings of the Quran.

Naskh could be described as a smaller version of *thuluth*, used for the text of the Islamic holy book and in literary manuscripts.

Muḥaqqaq and *rīḥān* have been especially used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries under the Mamluks and Mongols for copying the Quran. The latter style is a smaller version of the former.

Tauqīʿ was used for official administrative purposes and royal decrees, and *riqāʿ*, which is a smaller version of *tauqīʿ*, for daily correspondence.

References to the size of these calligraphic styles do not allude to generic measurements, but rather to the number of dots needed to trace the *alif* and to the following proportional and geometrical formation of the other letters. All of the six scripts codified by Ibn Muqla progress in a vertical dimension, contrary to Kufic which develops on the horizontal dimension. These six scripts are consistent, regular, replicable and, above all, clearly and fully readable. The systems of orthography and vocalisation, comprising short vowel signs called *ḥarakāt* and other diacritical marks, were codified in the tenth century and are still in use today.

The calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 1022 or 1031) followed and improved the system initiated by Ibn-Muqla, adding even more elegance, roundedness, clarity and readability to the so-called Six Pens, the six traditional cursive styles. The Chester Beatty Collection in Dublin possesses a copy of the exclusive Quranic manuscript, which survived until today, completely written in full cursive by Ibn al-Bawwāb.[19]

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[18] For a visual exemplification of these styles, and a theoretical description, see Nabil F. Safwat, *The Art of the Pen: Calligraphy of the 14th to 20th Centuries* (London; New York: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1996), 228–34; Healey and Smith, *A Brief Introduction*, 89–102; Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1990), 1–34; Yasin Hamid Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

[19] D. S. Rice, *The Unique Ibn Al-Bawwāb Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library* (Dublin: Emery Walker, 1955).

The third stage in the development of the foundations of cursive scripts had been leaded by Yāqūt al-Musta'ṣimī (d. 1298), a former slave of the last 'Abbasid Caliph who drove the evolution of rounded scripts to its summit. He invented the trimming of the reed-pen and the clipping of its nib, and he left many authenticated works and students who followed his system, especially in Iran and Turkey.[20] His version of the Six Pens has been adopted in Anatolia, until the originator of the Ottoman calligraphic tradition, Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520), re-interpreted them, as it will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

As far as the academic literature devoted to Islamic calligraphy is concerned, it has been mainly focused on the sheer artistic, technical and formal aspects. A large literature dealing with these aspects has been produced both by universities and museums, often including a photographical apparatus of great impact, as exemplified by the excellent series *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art*.[21] Other important works have been published throughout the years, displaying numerous photographical examples of calligraphic specimen, from different periods and styles, and written on different media.[22] The recent book by Sheila Blair *Islamic Calligraphy* represents a scholarly synthesis of the academic knowledge on this topic, and a comprehensive presentation of all the different styles of Islamic calligraphy. Blair illustrates the historical development of this art, following a historical and chronological methodology. A further important, significant and relatively recent piece of scholarship is *The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* by Alain George, who focuses on the early historical development of calligraphy in Islam.

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[20] Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Yūsofī, 'Calligraphy', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 4, no. 7 (1990): 680–704.

[21] Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*; David Lewis James, *The Master Scribes: Qur'ans of the 10th to 14th Centuries AD*, vol. II, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (London: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1992); David Lewis James, *After Timur: Qur'ans of the 15th and 16th Centuries*, vol. III, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (London: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1992); Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*.

[22] Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979); Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohamed Sijelmassi, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); Martin Lings, *Splendours of Qur'an Calligraphy and Illumination* (Liechtenstein; New York: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2005); Fahmida Suleman, *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and Its Creative Expressions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2007).

As far as the Ottoman calligraphic tradition is concerned, Uğur Derman can be definitely acknowledged as the leading scholar and researcher in the field. His *Letters in Gold* represents the most important work in English language. The works by Rogers and Roxburgh offer a broad overview over Ottoman art, including calligraphy, and the interconnections with the historical background.[23] Stanley sheds light on aspects of the development of the art of penmanship especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[24] In Turkish, the excellent volumes by Alparslan and Serin are the reference works about the development of the art in the Ottoman period, also displaying the most important calligraphic specimen produced by Ottoman calligraphers.[25]

The Spiritual in Islamic Calligraphy

According to Nasr, within an Islamic context the term 'spirituality' can fundamentally refer to three terms: (i) *rūḥāniyya* (in Arabic), derived from the word *rūḥ* (spirit), which proceeds from the command (*amr*) of God (Q. 17:85); (ii) *maʿnawiyyat* (in Persian), derived from the word *maʿnā* (meaning), which conveys the concepts of inwardness, and of reality – in opposition to what is illusory; (iii) the flow of *baraka* (spiritual power), the grace that permeates the universe and all human beings, leading all things closer to their Source.[26] In Turkish, the term 'spirituality' refers to those aspects as well, and it is translated as *ruhanilik* or *manevilik*. The term *baraka* is also used, in common Turkish. Thus, the term spirituality evokes something which has God as its origins, something related to obeying God's decrees; something which is hidden, and that needs to be discovered and uncovered from the

[23] J. M. Rogers and R. M. Ward, *Süleyman the Magnificent* (London: British Museum Publications, 1988); J. M Rogers, *Empire of the Sultans: Ottoman Art from the Khalili Collection* (Alexandria; London: Art Services International; Nour Foundation, in association with the Khalili Family Trust, 2002); David J. Roxburgh, ed., *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005).
[24] Tim Stanley, 'Page-Setting in Late Ottoman Qur'ans. An Aspect of Standardization', *Manuscripta Orientalia* 10, no. 1 (2004): 56–63; Tim Stanley, 'After Müstakim-Zade', in *Islamic Art in the 19th Century*, ed. Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 89–108.
[25] Ali Alparslan, *Osmanlı hat sanatı tarihi* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 1999); Muhittin Serin, *Hat Sanatı ve Meşhur Hattatlar* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı, 2010).
[26] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), xvii.

surface of its outwardness; something that is permeated by grace and power, the same grace and power unifying all things. The spiritual cannot be easily defined, and for different people may simultaneously signify all the aforementioned concepts, or only some of those aspects. For this reason, as it will be clarified in the following methodological section, I did not define the term during my interviews, but I let the calligraphers express their views and understandings of what the spiritual means to them, in relation to their art.

Some definitions of the art of penmanship allude to the fact that the aim of calligraphy goes beyond its technical features. For instance, Ibn Muqla reveals in the *Risāla* that he composed his work 'so that man may rise up along its stations, and the pathways of guidance may become clear to him.'[27] The words *irtiqā'* (Sufi path of ascent) and *hidāya* (guidance), clearly possess a spiritual and religious connotation exceeding the surface of technical mastery.

The Sufi Iraqi calligrapher Abū Ḥaiyān (d. around 1009), in his treatise on penmanship, connects the art to a path of moral perfection: 'Handwriting is the tongue of the hand. Style is the tongue of the intellect. The intellect is the tongue of good actions and qualities. And good actions and qualities are the perfection of man.'[28] Other similar treatises in Persian connect penmanship with the fundamentals of religion (*uṣūl*), and with spiritual purity (*ṣafā*), and virtue (*khūbī*).[29]

An interesting Ottoman treatise on calligraphy, the *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*, written by the calligrapher Müstakîm-zade Süleyman Sadeddin Efendi (d. 1787)

> portrays calligraphy as the highest use of man's mental, physical, and moral faculties. In his discussion of the attributes of the calligrapher he reminds us that the true calligrapher should be a person of impeccable morals, and that calligraphy itself is a moral medium.[30]

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[27] Cited in Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 1:107.
[28] Rosenthal, 'Abū Ḥaiyān', 11.
[29] David J. Roxburgh, '"The Eye Is Favored for Seeing the Writing's Form": On the Sensual and the Sensuous in Islamic Calligraphy', *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): n. 18.
[30] Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 9.

While the visual and historical aspects of calligraphy have been widely studied, its spiritual bases have been limitedly investigated. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* by Schimmel is the only work entirely devoted to the socio-anthropological relevance of calligraphy. In particular, the third chapter deals entirely with mysticism.[31] Notwithstanding the fact that her work is rich of multiple references from poetic and mystical works, it is not always clear how those materials, from different historical periods and places, are connected together. Nasr in *Islamic Art and Spirituality* briefly analyses the art of calligraphy and provides interesting interpretations, which nonetheless reveal his universalist and essentialist approach.[32] Ernst analyses, in two different articles, Persian treatises written by Sufi calligraphers, showcasing the art of penmanship as a spiritual path. The Deccan Sirāj al-Shīrāzī (15th century) considered calligraphy as an experience of contemplation of Divine Beauty, and a practice of concentration and purification of the heart, leading to the development of qualities such as purity, patience, dedication, devotion, rigor, sacrifice, moderation, internal discipline, balance in the soul, and intense love.[33] Furthermore, Ernst successfully examines the inner meditative aspect of calligraphy depicted in the manuscript *Ādāb al-mashq*, written in the Safavid period by the calligrapher Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī (sixteenth century), envisioning calligraphy as a meditative experience connected to psychological and spiritual states and to the path of purification of the heart.[34]

The Turkish academic literature is focused primarily on the historical and technical development of calligraphy: the following sections will refer to important works in Turkish devoted to these aspects and penned by the aforementioned Derman, Alparslan and Serin. As far as the spiritual dimension of the art is concerned, some works showcase also an interest on inspiring stories, anectodotes and on the moral character of calligraphers,[35] while other works, such as *Kalem*

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[31] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 77–114.
[32] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 17–36.
[33] Carl W. Ernst, 'Sufism and the Aesthetics of Penmanship in Sirāj Al-Shīrāzī's "Tuḥfat Al-Muḥibbīn" (1454)', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 3 (2009): 431–42.
[34] Carl W. Ernst, 'The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy: Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī's Ādāb Al-Mashq', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, no. 2 (1992): 279–286.
[35] Müstakimzade Süleyman Sadeddin, *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*, ed. Mustafa Koç (İstanbul: Klasik, 2014); Mustafa bin Ahmet Ali and Esra Akın-Kıvanç, *Muṣṭafá ʿÂli's Epic Deeds of Artists: A Critical*

Güzeli in three volumes, focus on the technical and philosophical underpinnings of the art.[36]

The present work would aspire to providing a unique contribution to the development of the investigation of spirituality in Turkish contemporary calligraphy. Schimmel points out that 'many masters – apparently almost every famous calligrapher in Ottoman Turkey – were in one way or the other connected with a Sufi order'[37]. Notwithstanding the fact that calligraphy has been historically coupled with Sufism in Turkey, it is quite surprising that the formal and artistic dimensions have been mostly analysed by scholars. Furthermore, the present work can be classified as original both in terms of its contents, and in terms of its methodology. At the present stage, and according to my knowledge, there are no academic studies, in English or Turkish languages, specifically devoted to the contemporary Turkish calligraphic tradition, exploring phenomenologically the existential dimension and the experience of the practice of the art. Thus, it can be said that there was a gap in the field waiting to be filled.

Islamic Calligraphy in the Contemporary Era

Contemporary Islamic calligraphy is characterised by elements of fractures and continuity with its roots. A wide spectrum of different approaches can be identified in between the extremes of traditionalism and modernism. Some of the calligraphers who adopt the Arabic script into their artwork may have received a traditional training. Others may adopt Arabic letters and words using different types of media and various artistic expressions, without respecting the geometrical proportions existing behind the construction of letters. The tension between traditionalism and

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Edition of the Earliest Ottoman Text about the Calligraphers and Painters of the Islamic World (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Son Hattatlar* (Istanbul: Maarif Basımevi, 1955).

[36] Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır, *Medeniyet âleminde yazı ve İslâm medeniyetinde kalem güzeli*, vol. 1 (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1972); Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır, *Medeniyet âleminde yazı ve İslâm medeniyetinde kalem güzeli*, vol. 2 (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1974); Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır, *Medeniyet âleminde yazı ve İslâm medeniyetinde kalem güzeli*, vol. 3 (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1989).

[37] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 47.

modernity has been wonderfully illustrated by Porter in her *Word into Art*.[38] In particular, the artistic movement termed Ḥurūfiyya (not to be confused with the Sufi-Shīʿī movement which started from the fourteenth century in Iran), embraces several artists who project Arabic letters into modern abstract art, in the most diverse ways.[39]

The duality between these two opposed approaches does not conflate with the duality between spiritual and non-spiritual: modern abstract calligraphy can portray secular[40], as well as spiritual[41] themes. The difference between a traditional and modern approach consists in the way the artist has learnt the art, and in the way letters are constructed. As Özçay pointed out, it is not the usage of Arabic letters that constitutes the art of penmanship, but the respect and the maintenance of traditional rules in the construction of letters:

> If you neglect the classical perspective, and you move on, only trying to do new things, then your art becomes something else, it will not be *hat sanatı* (the art of the line). There are some people, like modern painters, who use the Arabic script in their own artwork, but actually that is not calligraphy. They are just using letters. My perspective is to be part of the tradition, and within the framework of the classical art, I create new approaches, like using different colours, transparent ink, or new materials. Mine is innovation within tradition. The letters are the same that have been written in the past, and that will be practiced in the future, in the same way. What may change are compositions, colours, and materials.[42]

The present work focuses on the traditional stream of calligraphy in contemporary Turkey. As it will be demonstrated, its features are strongly characterised by an educational training during which a master teaches specific rules to a disciple, who copies the proportioned script of the master.

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[38] Venetia Porter, *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (London: British Museum Press, 2006).
[39] Porter, 69–99.
[40] Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 161–84.
[41] Ayse Turgut, 'Sacred Calligraphy in Contemporary Art', in *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and Its Creative Expressions*, ed. Fahmida Suleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2010), 217–26.
[42] Özçay 01:16:38.

A strong religious connotation can also be perceived within the Turkish tradition of penmanship, which may not necessarily characterise the modern abstract stream of contemporary calligraphy. During my fieldwork, I have not met any calligraphers who are not practising Muslims. According to Hasan Çelebi, one of the most important exponents of the Turkish tradition, a calligrapher should not necessarily be a Muslim. However, he mentioned that he met only two calligraphers in his life who identify themselves with Christianity, and not with Islam, outside of Turkey.[43] This feature can be explained by the fact that within the Turkish traditional stream of calligraphy, most of the artistic production consists in verses from the Quran.

Methodology and Fieldwork

During my research I integrated different disciplines through the adoption of an interdisciplinary methodological approach, comprising some elements drawn from History, Art History, Philosophy, Phenomenology and Ethnography. I applied an *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) in the core sections of the present work. IPA is a qualitative, experiential and phenomenological research methodology initially developed in Health Psychology in 1996 and successively implemented more broadly in Humanities and Social Sciences.[44] The initial aim of IPA was to understand healthcare and illness from the patient or service user perspective.[45] It is now more generally conceived for the analysis of experience through the medium of the interview. This methodology is philosophically grounded on Phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, 1859–1938) and Hermeneutics (Martin Heidegger, 1889–1976).

IPA has been defined as a 'qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences.'[46] This methodology requires designing research open questions to be answered preferably

[43] Çelebi 15:37.
[44] See Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009).
[45] Jan Pringle et al., 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Discussion and Critique', *Nurse Researcher* 18, no. 3 (2011): 20–24.
[46] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, para. 2.

through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The data is collected, transcribed, and analysed by the researcher after a process involving reading and re-reading. Finally, the analysis of the interpreter can be designed in several different ways, as in the form of a narrative or of a conceptual analysis of themes, supported by numerous excerpts from participants. The latter has been the approach adopted in the present work. It is vital for the researcher to develop some qualities during the research, such as being able to listen carefully and to suspend preconceptions, flexibility, open-mindedness, empathy, patience, and in the case of the present work, willingness to enter into the calligrapher's world. Having access to a rich and detailed personal account is considered to be extremely important for a subsequent rich analysis.

I decided to opt for such a methodology because of the central role played in spirituality by the notion of experience. IPA possesses all the necessary characteristics to investigate what can be defined as a spiritual experience experienced by the religious consciousness.

In the following sections I will introduce the philosophical foundations of IPA, that is, a hermeneutic phenomenology, and how I applied this specific interpretative methodology during my fieldwork in Istanbul and in Konya.

The Philosophical Foundations of IPA

IPA is not meant to simply convey the so-called 'insider's perspective'. It is grounded on what can be defined as a hermeneutic phenomenology, which is what will be introduced in this subsection.

My particular approach to Phenomenology can be defined in Heideggerian terms as the study of persons-in-context. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives human being as *Dasein* (there-being), a being fundamentally inscribed in a context, 'already thrown' into a pre-existing world of people and objects, language and culture'[47], a being which is 'always somewhere, always located and always amidst

[47] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 95.

and involved with some kind of meaningful context.'[48] From this perspective, I do not consider Phenomenology as a transcendental and noetic study of essences, as they appear to our conscience,[49] but as an unveiling of the experience lived by a conscience interacting with and within a web of other persons-in-context, objects, language and relationships. Heidegger refuses a dualistic separation between subject and objects. The individual is an inclusive part of reality, and the individual's consciousness, in Husserlian terms, possesses an essential intentionality towards objects, a 'directness-at-objects', which in Heidegger's thought is not only mental; it is actually a primal intentionality and projection towards the world and its objects, through a physical engagement with them. Our engagement with the world plays such an important role in our lives, to the extent that we can be structurally and constitutionally described as being-in-the-world. Thus, the phenomenological element of my approach does not only strive to unveil the art experience as it becomes manifest to the religious consciousness of Muslim artists, but it strives also to understand the context, the values and the culture in which that consciousness is so deeply and structurally immersed, but which is also in reverse able to shape.

My phenomenological approach in relation to the study of Islam does not aim at revealing the essence of the Sacred itself, epitomized by Rudolf Otto in *The idea of the Holy* as the numinous experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It rather aims at giving voice of the experience of the Sacred as it is perceived by Muslim Turkish calligraphers performing their art in Istanbul, and in Konya, without entering into the debate about the actual existence of the Sacred, claimed to have been perceived. From this perspective, my phenomenological take is not theology in disguise, but an unveiling of data of the human conscience, with a subsequent coherent interpretation and contextualisation of this data. As Blum recently suggested, 'rather than positing the existence of "the sacred", or claiming that religion is defined by an irreducible essence (whatever that may be), I argue that phenomenology of religion should instead focus on the consciousness and experience

[48] Michael Larkin, Simon Watts, and Elizabeth Clifton, 'Giving Voice and Making Sense in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 106.
[49] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), vii–viii.

of the religious subject – an entirely temporal and worldly object of inquiry.'[50] In this regard, the direction of my phenomenological approach does not move vertically, as in Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, towards the essence of the phenomenon we call religion, but it moves horizontally towards a plurality of consciousness claiming to having perceived something of that essence. 'Rather than assuming either the existence or non-existence of religious realities, the phenomenologist of religion suspends or brackets this question in order to disclose meanings as constructed and experienced from the perspective of religious consciousness.'[51] This attitude of judicial suspension has been termed by Husserl *epoché*, a Greek philosophical term of Sceptics origins involving the suspension of our assumptions, in order to understand how a phenomenon is experienced and interpreted by a human being, in his own world of reference and meanings.

Summarising the ideas introduced above, and connecting them to my specific research topic, IPA has two different components. The first phenomenological component aims at unravelling the experience of a participant, as claimed to be experienced by himself. The second hermeneutic component aims at interpreting the experience of a being-in-the-world as experienced in his there-being, that is, in his world of meanings into which he 'always already' finds himself thrown into. Thus, the first component will help me to understand and bring to light the participants' world, describing their art experience as closer as possible to their point of view, while the second component will guide me in interpreting their experiential accounts in a coherent way, correlating them to the specific cultural, religious, artistic and spiritual backgrounds. Representation, interpretation and historical contextualisation, are all connected together in a hermeneutical circularity of understanding, where every element of the circle does not linearly and straightforwardly bring to the other, but in which each and every element dynamically and continually bring more force and intellectual clarity to the other.

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[50] Jason N. Blum, 'Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 4 (2012): 1029.
[51] Blum, 1032.

Fieldwork and Applied Methodology

In this section I will describe how I carried out my research in Turkey, and how I applied the methodology as far depicted. The research can be divided into three phases: (i) a preliminary one-month fieldwork which allowed me to establish contacts, to immerse myself into the cultural Turkish context, and to take an intensive course in Turkish; (ii) a three-month fieldwork where I conducted all the interviews, I silently observed the calligraphic training in two different schools, and I experimented the calligraphic training; (iii) a final phase, which consisted in transcribing the interviews; reading, re-reading and deeply reflecting on the collected material; identifying themes; analysing and contextualising these themes within Turkish Islamic culture.

During my first fieldwork in 2013, I completely immersed myself in the art, with the aim of having a direct experience of the calligraphic media. I visited thirty Ottoman mosques in Istanbul, the Topkapı Palace Museum, and the Sakıp Sabancı Museum, which displays an outstanding collection of Ottoman calligraphic specimen, especially from the nineteenth century. I visited the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), vital to the development and the perpetuation of the art of penmanship in Turkey, and internationally, especially through the organisation of events and competitions related to calligraphy. Its very useful research library allowed me to consult important sources for my research. Meeting the Director of the Centre, Dr Eren, helped me in getting into contact with the most important and renowned calligraphers during my following longer research trip. Dr Eren was very favourably interested in the topic of my research. Moreover, I contacted the calligrapher Efdaluddin Kılıç, and I attended some of his calligraphic lessons at the Caferağa Medresesi Sanatları Merkezi, a school of traditional Turkish arts situated close to the Ayasofia Museum. Kılıç informed me about the fact that in Turkey around thirty accomplished calligraphers are able to propagate and to keep alive the tradition, delivering to their students a license (*ijāza*) to teach the art and to sign their calligraphic artwork. Thanks to Kılıç, I started the process of identification of the calligraphers that I wanted to include in my research, and that I refined during my second trip.

During my second three-month research trip in 2014, I decided to take calligraphic lessons from Efdaluddin Kılıç, with the aim of understanding the calligraphic training from within, acquiring a participatory perspective. I also silently observed the training at the Caferağa Medresesi and at the IRCICA, where Ferhat Kurlu teaches the art. I continued my intellectual study of the history of Ottoman calligraphy, together with my immersion and direct experience of calligraphic works, which consisted in visiting the most important mosques and museums displaying Ottoman calligraphy in Edirne, Bursa, and Konya. I was also able to visit the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts during a brief visit to Istanbul in 2016, once the museum has been re-opened to the public after a period of restoration.

The most important element of my fieldwork comprised the interviews I conducted with the following calligraphers: Uğur Derman, Hasan Çelebi, Hüseyin Kutlu, Savaş Çevik, Fuat Başar, Hüseyin Öksüz (Konya), Mehmed Özçay, Efdaluddin Kılıç, Ayten Tiriyaki, Ferhat Kurlu, Hilal Kazan, Fatih Özkafa (Konya), Aburrahman and Seyit Ahmet Depeler (Konya). I have subsequently contacted Soraya Syed, with the aim of having an example of a calligrapher who studied the art in Turkey, but who lives in the United Kingdom. During these interviews, I presented my research to calligraphers (Appendix A) and I obtained their consent to participate to the study (Appendix B).[52] I always presented myself straightforwardly, expressing with honesty my interests, and my deep respect and sympathy for Islamic culture, even if I am not a Muslim. I also made it clear that what I was looking for, was a subjective understanding of the art. Subsequently, I proceeded to ask my research questions on their art journey, on their art experience, and on the relationship with the religious dimension (Appendix D). Every interview has been different. The questions showed in Appendix D provide only an idea of the possible areas of my exploration: they have not been raised exactly in that specific way and order. IPA invites the researcher to be in a state of attentiveness, empathy and consideration for the participant and his or her sensibility. This led me to shape the open, semi-structured interviews, according to each calligrapher, with the aim of letting their views and understandings emerge. Moreover, I informally collected data

[52] See Appendix C for a Turkish translation of forms A and B.

in a relaxed environment or situation, while drinking tea or visiting their studios, after our interview.[53] This approach allowed me not only to have access to deeper and richer personal accounts, but also to different kind of data and reflections, otherwise not accessible if pursued in a more formal setting. The formal interviews have been conducted in Turkish, with the help of a translator (Ph.D. researcher Ayşenur Korkmaz), and recorded on audio files.

During the third and final stage, I have transcribed in English the collected material. IPA requires a reflexive, empathic and deep process of reading and re-reading the material, recollecting not only what has been said, but also how it has been said, together with the generated emotions. Patterns of meaning can be then identified in the different accounts, which can be organised in a thematic form. Those patterns can be identified within the same transcript, in a cumulative way, or across different accounts. This methodology led me to the identification of seven main themes which emerged from the accounts, and which I will present in the following section. In my analysis I have correlated what emerged during the data collection with the historical, spiritual and artistic Turkish context. The phenomenological account is central, through an abundant use of direct quotes, and it has been contextualised through the analysis of the horizon of pre-comprehension of the subject. Throughout this work, whenever I have referred to the primary collected material, I have mentioned in the footnotes the last name of my participant followed by the time in the interview where the referred paragraph starts.

Overview of the Thesis

The reflection on the material collected during my fieldwork in Turkey, led me to the identification of seven dominant themes that I will analyse in this work. A specific chapter has been devoted to the exploration of each and every theme. I have organised these themes as a journey from the most material aspects to the most abstract ones.

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[53] For this methodological approach, see Margarethe Kusenbach, 'Street Phenomenology The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool', *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003): 455–85.

In Chapter One I analyse the roots, the origins, and the soil from which the tradition has spread. The calligraphers feel to be deeply linked with their artistic and historical heritage, which I illustrate from the Ottoman times until the lives of contemporary calligraphers.

Chapter Two is devoted to the spiritual and religious imagery hidden behind calligraphic implements. In particular, I analyse how matter and spirit interact at the level of symbolism, in relation to the pen, to the ink, and to the paper.

Chapter Three showcases the symbolism of the forms created with the material calligraphic implements. When the pen is immerged in the ink, and it touches the surface of paper, the point is created. According to a system of proportions, the calligrapher measures the construction of letters in reference to the point. When letters are connected together, words and sentences are created.

In Chapter Four I analyse the importance of the body, through which the calligrapher traces calligraphic shapes and strokes. The calligrapher embodies words and sentences, within the mind and within the body, through repeated and controlled movements. The practice presents challenges and struggles, and can be mastered controlling the body. I report accounts on healing experiences, through the practice of the art. I also illustrate some experienced dreams, relevant to calligraphy, in which the body is projected to the oneiric dimension.

Chapter Five focuses the analysis on the art conceived as a pathway requiring the development of several moral qualities and virtues. The path is led by a master, towards whom calligraphers feel a sense of respect and emotional attachment. The master guides the student to experience a process of technical and moral improvement, and of closeness to the Divine. When artistic capabilities and spiritual maturity have been achieved, the *ijāza*, or the license to teach the art and to sign the calligraphic artwork, can be granted from the master to the student. Achieved the *ijāza*, a calligrapher bears the responsibility of transmitting the art to others.

In Chapter Six I describe calligraphers as agents of remembrance. One of their tasks consists in portraying, in the most beautiful manner, the verses of the Quran. Since their artwork focuses on representing religious materials, including prayers and the remembrance of God and of Prophet Muhammad, their art is

considered an act of worship. For this reason, most calligraphers perform their art in a state of ritual purity.

Chapter Seven investigates the conceptualisation of some calligraphers of Divine Beauty, in relation to their art. Calligraphy is perceived as an abstract type of non-imitative art. I illustrate the viewpoint of calligraphers on the relationship between the form and the meaning of a calligraphic piece. I also present and analyse some specific instances of calligraphic works where form and meaning are deeply correlated.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OTTOMAN AND TURKISH CALLIGRAPHIC TRADITION

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the Ottoman and Turkish calligraphic tradition. The chapter will show the continuity of the art from its origins in the fifteenth century to the present, an art which has been perpetuated through an unbroken chain of master-disciple transmission until nowadays. Thus, the Turkish calligraphic tradition can be described as a *living* tradition. It is not confined exclusively to spaces such as museums or historical books. The art is living, carried out by human beings who perceive it not as a token of the past, but also as a blessing of the present; not only as an artistic technique, but also as a lifestyle integrated with their beliefs; not only as a creative expression of the individual self, but also as an emanation and protraction of its glorious origins, and as a way to approach the Divine.

Ottoman Sultans have been generous patrons of the arts, and their court has been described by historians as a centre of art production.[1] Several Sultans contributed to the development of calligraphy in the Ottoman lands, such as Süleyman (reigned 1520–1566), who extensively patronised calligraphers and collected books, manuscripts and calligraphic albums from all the conquered lands.[2] Some Sultans have not only patronised the art, but they also studied it in depth. Among those who became accomplished calligraphers, the following can be mentioned: Sultan Ahmed III (reigned 1703–1730), Sultan Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839), and Sultan Abdülmecid (reigned 1839–1861).[3] Istanbul became a vital centre for calligraphy on multiple levels. First, its numerous buildings, comprising mosques, schools, palaces, gates, and fountains, necessitated calligraphers to ornate

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[1] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 232–50; Serpil Bağcı and Zeren Tanındı, 'The Ottomans: From Mehmed II to Murad III', in *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600*, ed. David J. Roxburgh (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 262–64.
[2] Rogers and Ward, *Süleyman the Magnificent*, 28–35, 55–58.
[3] Alparslan, *Osmanlı hat sanatı tarihi*, 110–11, 119–21, 133.

their walls. Those calligraphic instances enriching the city were also art pieces to be contemplated and from which inspiration could be granted. Secondly, the treasure of the Topkapı Palace guarded some of the most lavish manuscripts and calligraphic albums of the Islamic world. Finally, many calligraphers emigrated from Iran to the Ottoman Empire from the fifteenth century, enriching the Ottoman tradition with their skills and knowledge.[4] Thus, for centuries calligraphers resided in Istanbul to teach and practice the art, and that made the city the most important centre to study Islamic calligraphy. Today, Istanbul continues to carry out its primacy. Muslims from multiple countries travel to Turkey with the aim of studying the art in a city which preserved its uninterrupted heritage. During my experience in the calligraphic schools I visited, I met students from Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Istanbul attracts aspirant calligraphers also from countries with a majority non-Muslim population, including the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

Notwithstanding the fact that the tradition has been able to perpetuate itself throughout centuries, the art experienced very challenging moments too. During the process of emergence of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) abolished the Caliphate in 1924, putting an end to centuries of Ottoman rule.[5] In 1928 the Arabic script was abolished too, and the Latin script adopted instead, with the aim of ceasing the link with the Islamic Ottoman past and to advance the Kemalist process of secularisation and modernisation of the country.[6] With the elimination of the Arabic script, the art of calligraphy entered into a very critical phase. It disappeared nearly as much as the usage of the Arabic script disappeared in the social sphere of Turkish culture.[7] Most calligraphers lost their jobs, and their artwork continued only as an expression of religious sentiments and purposes.[8] During the sixties and seventies the art was perceived as outdated, as a symbol of the

[4] Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 515.
[5] Gazi Dogan, 'The Establishment of Kemalist Autocracy and Its Reform Policies in Turkey' (Kansas State University, 2016), 77–79.
[6] Dogan, 336.
[7] Derman 1:52.
[8] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 596.

past, and Western forms of art expression were performed instead.[9] From the 1980 the situation changed. The establishment of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), stimulated new interest in the art, nationally and internationally.[10]

In this chapter a historical overview on Ottoman calligraphy will be provided, presenting its artistic features, its originator and its most important exponents. Subsequently, I will introduce the developments of the art during the nineteenth century, with the aim of presenting the masters of the masters of the contemporary tradition. Finally, I will showcase the art in contemporary Turkey, and the biographies of the living calligraphers I have interviewed.

1.1 Ottoman Calligraphy

The aim of this section is to provide some fundamental notions on Ottoman calligraphy. Several academic works, written in Turkish[11] and English[12], have analysed the subject in depth. I will first provide a brief overview of the art in Anatolia before the rise of the Ottomans. Subsequently, I will introduce the originator of Ottoman calligraphy – often recalled by contemporary calligraphers in the interviews I have conducted – and the major exponents of the art, together with its ways of expression, presenting the origins of the artistic stream that survived until the present days. The historicity of some of the incidents and anecdotes reported in the present chapter cannot be taken as granted. I decided to report also anecdotic

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[9] Tiryaki 23:49.
[10] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 598–99.
[11] Alparslan, *Osmanlı hat sanatı tarihi*; Serin, *Hat Sanatı ve Meşhur Hattatlar*, 115–305; Ali and Akın-Kıvanç, *Muṣṭafá Alī's Epic Deeds of Artists*; Ahmet Akcan, *Hüsn-i hat buluşması* (Istanbul: Istanbul Büyüksehir Belediyesi, 2008).
[12] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 476–533; M. Uğur Derman, *Letters in Gold: Ottoman Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998); M. Uğur Derman, *Eternal Letters from the Abdul Rahman Al Owais Collection of Islamic Calligraphy, Sharjah*, trans. İrvin Cemil Schick (Sharjah: Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, 2009); M. Uğur Derman, 'The Art of Calligraphy in the Ottoman Empire', *Foundation for Science Technology and Civilisation*, 2007, 1–15; Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*; Zeren Tanındı, Ayşe Aldemir Kilercik, and Nazan Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı Museum Collection of the Arts of the Book and Calligraphy* (Istanbul: Sabancı University Sakıp Sabancı Museum, 2012); Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick, eds., *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

material that emerges from the sources because contemporary calligraphers feel to be connected with those stories. From a phenomenological point of view, their perspective on the history of Ottoman calligraphy is an important element that I had to take into account, shaping and giving meaning to their art experience.

Ottoman calligraphy did not start within a vacuum. It can be seen as a continuation of the Seljuk art. Ottomans and Seljuks share common roots: they both were tribes originated from the Oghuz, a central Asiatic Turkic tribal confederation of the steppes which expanded westwards.[13] The Seljuks of the Sultanate of Rum established their dominion in Anatolia since the eleventh century, instituting their capital in Konya.[14] The art of the Seljuks of Rum shared elements in common with that of the Seljuks of Iran, influenced by Persian culture in several ways.[15] As far as calligraphy is concerned, a distinct tradition in the art started to flourish from the twelfth century, producing manuscripts of the Quran and poetical and mystical works in Persian, such as the Masnavi by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), whose shrine in Konya became a centre of pilgrimage.[16] The calligraphic styles adopted by the Seljuks were the Six Pens (*aqlām al-sitta*) developed by Yāqūt al-Mustaʿṣimī (d. 1298) in Baghdad, among which the styles *naskh* and *rīḥān* were mainly used, with some minor modifications.[17] After the dissolution of the Seljuk sultanate, the Mevlevis continued the production of manuscripts: the Sufi *tekke* (dervish lodge) was a centre for the promulgation of arts and crafts, among which poetry, music and calligraphy reached particular prominence.[18]

In 1453, Mehmet II (reigned 1451–1481) conquered Constantinople, defeating Byzantine forces, and inaugurated a new phase in the history of the region, laying the foundations for what became one of the greatest world empires. Mehmet II lavishly decorated the gate of the Topkapı Palace with an enormous, intricate and golden symmetrical composition of Quranic verses (Q. 15:45-8), penned by the

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[13] Peter B. Golden, 'The Turks: A Historical Overview', in *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600*, ed. David J. Roxburgh (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 19.
[14] Golden, 26.
[15] Nazan Ölçer, 'The Seljuks and Artuqids of Medieval Anatolia', in *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600*, ed. David J. Roxburgh (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 106.
[16] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 366.
[17] Blair, 369.
[18] Blair, 370.

Anatolian calligrapher ʿAlī ibn Yaḥyā al-Ṣūfī.[19] During the process of Islamisation of the city, Mehmet erected the Fatih Mosque, where monumental calligraphies of Yaḥyā al-Ṣūfī are on display. Mehmet's son, Bayezid II (reigned 1481–1512) was the patron and student of the calligrapher Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520), son of Mustafa Dede, *shaykh* of the Suhrawardiyya order. It has been reported that the Sultan himself showed deep respect to his calligraphy master, holding his inkwell and placing pillows behind the master's back while he was practicing.[20] These features reverberate in the present days in the respect demonstrated by students towards their teachers.[21] In 1485, Bayezid II added to his treasure seven outstanding works of Yāqūt al-Musta'ṣimī, and asked to his calligraphy teacher to be inspired by those and to create a new style.[22] Scholars have discussed the political reason underpinning his request, consisting in the Sultan's desire to mark the beginning of a new empire, and its novel dynasty, with a shift in the artistic tradition.[23] Apparently, Şeyh Hamdullah considered Yāqūt's styles unsurpassable, and agreed to the request of the Sultan only under his insistence.[24] Beyazid II opened the treasure of his palace to the calligrapher, so that he could study in depth all the calligraphic manuscripts he wanted to peruse. With all the precious works, Şeyh Hamdullah retired himself in a quiet village called Alemdağ, on the Anatolian side of Istanbul, and entered into a period of spiritual seclusion for two cycles of forty days (*arbaʿīn*).[25] He dedicated himself to spiritual contemplations, fasting, and calligraphy. During a vision of the prophet-saint Khiḍr (who represents the archetype of the spiritual guide in the journey to God), he was taught the styles he was looking for.[26] Derman stated that 'in

[19] Abdülhamit Tüfekçioğlu, 'Symmetrical Compositions in Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Architectural Inscriptions in Asia Minor', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 454–55, fig. 26.1.
[20] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 28.
[21] See chapter five, section one.
[22] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 29.
[23] Fatih Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı (Istanbul and the Art of Calligraphy)', in *Bir Fotoğrafın Aynasında: İstanbul'un Meşhur Hattatları (Through the Mirror of a Picture: Eminent Calligraphers of Istanbul)*, ed. Yusuf Çağlar (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2010), 114.
[24] Derman 36:29.
[25] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 29. See chapter five, section three.
[26] Annemarie Schimmel and Barbara Rivolta, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, vol. 50, no. 1 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 21.

that way he created a new path in the art, the *Şeyh Vâdisi* (the valley of the *shaykh*). This is the best example of the spiritual impact on the art of calligraphy.'[27]

The styles revised by Şeyh Hamdullah are the Six Pens which I will refer to, from now on, in Turkish: *sülüs*, *nesih*, *muhakkak*, *reyhânî*, *tevkî'*, *rıkâ'*. The monograph by Serin presents magnificent and multiple examples of Şeyh Hamdullah's art pieces, showcasing in detail all of these styles and their technical features.[28] The Six Pens enhanced by Şeyh Hamdullah reached a new level of elegance, dynamism, readability, and balance. Among the aforementioned styles, *sülüs* and *nesih* became in the Ottoman tradition the most used, in different variants, as it will be demonstrated.

As far as the production of Şeyh Hamdullah is concerned, it consists in books, *kıt'alar* (single calligraphic pieces), calligraphic albums, and monumental inscriptions, among which the most striking examples are on display at the Bayezid II Mosque. These media became the forms of expression of calligraphy in the Ottoman tradition. From the nineteenth century, the *levha* (a calligraphic panel meant to be hung on walls) became one of the most used forms of expression, as it will be discussed in the following section.

Concerning books, these include copies of the Quran, prayer books, and collections of poetry. Şeyh Hamdullah wrote fifty entire copies of the Quran in his life.[29] Other books devoted to all other sciences were written by scribes and not by calligraphers.

The *kıt'a* (piece or section) is a particular type of calligraphic work having a rectangular shape, and a horizontal orientation, bearing writing only on one side. Multiple forms of *kıt'a* may be used, usually starting with a line in *sülüs* followed by other lines in *nesih*.[30] A *kıt'a* may contain verses from the Quran, traditions, poetic quatrains, prayers, or *karalama* (calligraphic exercises comparable to abstract art, where the script fills all the space of paper, in every direction). If several *kıt'aler* are bounded together, a *murakkaa* (album) is composed. The *kıt'aler* can be pasted

[27] Derman 41:39.
[28] Muhittin Serin, *Hattat Şeyh Hamdullah: hayâtı, talebeleri, eserleri* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Akademisi Kültür ve Sanat Vakfı, 2007), 120–26.
[29] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 480.
[30] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 26–27.

together on one of their edges, usually creating an album in the form of accordion. The four edges of each page may be protected by the usage of leather or cloth. A specific type of *murakkaa* consists in the calligraphic album, conceived for teaching purposes. Those albums, to be transmitted and copied by calligraphy students, are distinguished in (a) *müfredât*, where letters are written both in their separated form, and in their connected forms with all the other letters, showing how different ligatures between those can be displayed; and (b) *mürekkebât* where letters are connected together in a meaningful way: the lessons consist in sentences from prayers, traditions, Quranic verses, meant to be copied by the student. In chapter three, section three, some of these exercise albums will be showed. Thanks to this copious calligraphic production, Şeyh Hamdullah was able to lay solid foundations for the study and the propagation of the new Ottoman styles.

During the sovereignty of Süleyman (reigned 1520–1566), the calligrapher Ahmed Karahisârî (1469–1556) revived the style of Yāqūt, and 'transferred Ottoman calligraphy from the pages of the Qurans to architecture, applying it on a monumental scale.'[31] The inscriptions displayed in the Süleymaniye Mosque Complex are some of the most striking examples of his art. His school was influential and artistically enriched hundreds of mosques and edifices built during Süleyman's time. However, it lasted for one generation only, after which the Ottoman tradition returned to the styles of Şeyh Hamdullah.

The school inaugurated by Şeyh Hamdullah continued to exist thanks to the teachings of all of his students, and reached another level of reinterpretation with Hâfiz Osman (1642–1698), who became the standard for Ottoman calligraphers. He learnt the art under the guidance of Derviş Ali (d. 1673) and Suyolcuzâde Mustafa Eyyûbî (1619–1686). Hâfiz Osman deeply studied the albums by Şeyh Hamdullah, with the aim of perfecting his style, choosing the most beautiful examples of his art. He reduced the size of *nesih*, and he refined the letter shapes and their connections, providing a sense of a more elegant and spaced style. His *kıt'aler* – written with a horizontal first line in *sülüs*, two subsequent lines in *nesih*, and a final line in *sülüs*

[31] Bağcı and Tanındı, 'The Ottomans: From Mehmed II to Murad III', 263.

again – profoundly inspired calligraphic albums penned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[32]

During the fifteenth century the Persian style called *nastaʿlīq* entered in the Ottoman lands through correspondence.[33] It influenced the development of two distinct Turkish styles: *dîvânî* and *ta'lîk*.

The *dîvânî* style is fluid and dynamic. Its letters may be elongated according to the desire of the calligrapher, and do not abide to strict proportions. At the beginning of its introduction the style was used unvocalised, as the Persian *nastaʿlīq* is. Being used at the Imperial Court in official documents, it required clarity and precision of meaning. For this reason, a new version was created: the *celî* (evident) *dîvânî*. The style is vocalised and extremely rich, dynamic, and dense. It is almost impossible to add letters to the script, eliminating the problem of forgery. All the proclamations, edicts, and decrees of the Sultan were written in scrolls using this style. Every line turns up towards the end, providing to the line the shape of a boat.[34] At the top of the scroll there is the *tuğra*, a calligraphic and symbolic emblem which functions as the signature of the Sultan. The emblem is an extremely intricate signature, written by a distinguished calligraphy officer serving at the Imperial Court. In the *tuğra* we always find the name of the Sultan, his patronymic, and the words *el-muzaffer dâimâ* (the ever-victorious).[35]

The *nastaʿlīq* style, which reached its perfection in Iran under the Persian Mīr ʿImād Ḥasanī (1554–1615), was brought to Turkey by one of Mīr ʿImād's pupil, the dervish ʿAbdī Bukhārāʾī (d. 1647). The style was later adopted by Yesârî Mehmed Es'ad Efendi (d. 1798). The contemporary calligraphic tradition in *ta'lîk* goes back to Yesârî in an uninterrupted chain of master-disciple. Interestingly, Yesârî was paralysed on the right side of his body, hence his nickname 'left handed'. Rejected by his master because of his condition, he was accepted by the Sufi Dedezâde Mehmed Efendi (d. 1768), obtaining by him the *ijāza* in 1754.[36] The son and pupil of Yesârî, Yesârîzâde Mustafa İzzet (d. 1849) elongated the style and made it less

[32] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 485.
[33] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 18.
[34] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 508–9; Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 18.
[35] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 38.
[36] Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı', 126.

packed. The style is mostly used for poetry, with lines written with an obliquus orientation. However, its usage for Quranic verses and invocations is also attested. *Ta'lîk* is elegant, dynamic, balanced and fluid. It requires a great mastery, since it alternates thickness and thinness in the calligraphic stroke. It also requires to rotate the nib while writing.

Numerous masters and students of calligraphy were members of a Sufi *ṭarīqa*, such as Halvetî, Celvetî, Nakşıbendî, and Mevlevî. As Derman remarked, 'Sufism is integrated with the art of calligraphy. It is hard to find in the Ottoman times a student of calligraphy who was not at all connected in a way or the other with a *ṭarīqa*.'[37] For this reason, the calligraphic tradition in Turkey inherited several Sufi concepts and values, even when not performed by Sufis.

1.2 Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries

In this section I will illustrate the critical transition of the art from its glorious peak reached in the nineteenth century to its critical stage in the twentieth century. I will present the most important exponents of the art, who transmitted the tradition to the present days.

The greatest contributor to the development of the art in the nineteenth century is Mustafa Râkım Efendi (1757–1826).[38] Mustafa Râkım studied the art with his elder brother and with the Sufi Üçüncü Derviş Ali (d. 1786). He was patronised by the sultans Selim III (reigned 1789–1807) and Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839). He reached the summit in the design of the imperial *tuğra*, source of inspiration for all the other imperial emblems created after him. He followed the school of Hâfiz Osman, and he perfected the *celî* (large) *sülüs* to be used for larger inscriptions, gracefully blending 'the letters together in compositions such that the proportions

[37] Derman 42:40. For examples of calligraphic art performed by Sufis in Istanbul, or related to Sufism, see Ekrem Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)* (Istanbul: Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2007), 116–67.
[38] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 98.

and forms of the letters would not be deformed'[39], even when contemplated from far away. Some of his compositions consist of large wooden panels to be hanged on walls, a new media that became recurrently employed after him.[40]

It is possible to refer to a Mustafa Râkım School, of which all the other renowned calligraphers of the nineteenth century are exponents. The art of penmanship reached its peak in Turkey with Mehmed Şevki Efendi (1829–1887) in *sülüs* and *nesih*, and with Sâmi Efendi (1838–1912) in *celî sülüs* and *celî ta'lîk*.[41]

Another exponent of the school of Râkım, is Kâdiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876), reciter of the Quran, *ney* player, and member of the Naqshbandī Sufi school.[42] Patronised by the sultans Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839) and Abdülmecid (reigned 1839–1861), he wrote the largest calligraphic panels of the Islamic world, hanged in Ayasofya Mosque. The massive *levhaler* possess 7.5 meters of diameter and display in a golden script the names of God, Prophet Muhammad, the four caliphs and the grandsons of the Prophet. Kâdiasker Mustafa İzzet also inscribed the circular calligraphy on the dome of Ayasofya, displaying the *basmala* and the Verse of Light (Q. 24:35).[43]

An important institution founded in 1915 by the Şeyhülislam Hayrullah Efendi (the empire's chief religious official) was the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn (the Calligraphers' School).[44] Several arts were taught together with calligraphy, such as history of calligraphy, *ebru* (paper marbling), *tezhip* (illumination), miniature painting, and book binding. The teachers who served at the school have been among those who transmitted the art to the masters of the masters of the present-day tradition.

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[39] Süleyman Berk, 'Mustafa RâKım Efendi's Architectural Calligraphy', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 321.
[40] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 502–3; Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 142–75.
[41] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 124–27, 142–47.
[42] Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı', 134–38.
[43] Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 61; Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 118.
[44] Zoe Griffith, 'Calligraphy and the Art of Statecraft in the Late Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkish Republic', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 3 (2011): 607; Gülbün Mesara, 'A. Süheyl Ünver'in Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn Hatıraları (The Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn Memoirs of A. Süheyl Ünver)', in *Bir Fotoğrafın Aynasında: İstanbul'un Meşhur Hattatları (Through the Mirror of a Picture: Eminent Calligraphers of Istanbul)*, ed. Yusuf Çağlar (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2010), 23.

The following are the names of the teachers, together with the styles or the arts that they were imparting at the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn: Hacı Ahmed Kâmal Akdik Efendi (*sülüs* and *nesih*), İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (*celî sülüs* and *tuğra*), Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan Efendi (*ta'lîk* and *celî ta'lîk*), Ferid Bey (*dîvânî* and *celî dîvânî*), Mehmet Said Bey (*rıkâ'*), Yeniköylü Nuri (illumination), Bahaeddin Efendi (book binding), Hasan Rıza Efendi (additional *sülüs* and *nesih* teacher), Kemaleddin Bey (Kufic), and Necmeddin Okyay (marbling and paper glazing).[45] The majority of the aforementioned masters were all pupils of the great Sâmi Efendi. Among those, I will briefly introduce Ahmed Kâmal Akdik, Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan, İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer, and some of their students, relevant for the propagation of the art until the present.

Ahmed Kâmal Akdik (1861–1941) was the last calligrapher who received by the Empire the title of *reisü'l-hattâtîn* (chief calligrapher), a title signalising that he was the most erudite calligrapher in the Ottoman state.[46]

The Mevlevi Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan (1869–1940) was an exemplary master of *ta'lîk* and *celî ta'lîk*, and his calligraphic albums are still used nowadays by students.[47]

İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (1873–1946) started the study of calligraphy with his father, who gave him to copy and write for more than a year the prayer *Rabbi yessir* (O my Lord, make things easy and do not make them difficult. O my Lord, let everything be brought to a propitious conclusion).[48] He subsequently studied with Sâmi Efendi, when he joined the Imperial Council Office as a calligraphy officer. He became a *tuğrakeş* (writer of the Sultan's signature) under the guidance of Sâmi Efendi. İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer is remembered by his students as benevolent, polite, generous, never angry, spiritually noble, eloquent, and able to instil the love of calligraphy in his pupils.[49] In particular, his students Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı (1898–

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[45] Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı', 120.
[46] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 158.
[47] Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan, *Hulûsî Efendi'nin ta'lîk meşk murakkaı*, ed. Muhittin Serin (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 1999).
[48] For an analysis of the prayer, see chapter three, section three. İnal, *Son Hattatlar*, 98–102; Yusuf Çağlar, ed., *Bir Fotoğrafın Aynasında: İstanbul'un Meşhur Hattatları (Through the Mirror of a Picture: Eminent Calligraphers of Istanbul)* (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2010), 61–75.
[49] Çağlar, *Bir Fotoğrafın Aynasında*, 75.

1964) and Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976) have been some of the last living calligraphers from the Ottoman era, together with Hamid Aytaç (1891–1982) and Kemal Batanay (1893–1981).

Necmeddin Okyay was called *hezarfen*, a man of a thousand sciences. He learnt paper marbling (*ebru*) in the Sufi dervish lodge in Üsküdar (*Özbekler dergâhi*). He was a memoriser of the Quran, a prayer leader, an archer, a rose gardener, a poet. Even when old, at the cry of '*yā ḥaqq!*' (O Truth!) his strengths were manifesting again in his body while shooting arrows.[50] He coined the expression *fanā' fī Sāmī* (annihilation in Sâmi), using the Sufi concept of annihilation of the ego in the Divine, in the context of the artistic annihilation of the individual creativity in the master Sâmi Efendi's creativity.[51] Thanks to him, Ottoman arts such as paper marbling and book binding have been transmitted to the present.[52]

Hamid Aytaç started his calligraphic career as a student of Hacı Nazif Bey (1846–1913) and later on he benefited from the mastery of the teachers of the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn. In figure 1.1 some of the aforementioned masters can be seen reunited together at the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn.

[50] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 287.
[51] Derman, 278.
[52] Griffith, 'Calligraphy and the Art of Statecraft in the Late Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkish Republic', 611.

Figure 1.1 *Calligraphers in Istanbul (10 June 1932). Front row, seated (right to left): İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer, Ahmed Kâmal Akdik, Necmeddin Okyay. Second row, standing (right to left): Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı, Üsküplü Halil Efendi, Hamid Aytaç, Osman Fevzi. After Çağlar, Bir fotoğrafın aynasında: İstanbul'un meşhur hattatları, 200.*

The lessons at the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn were held once or twice a week, in all the mentioned arts. The traditional one-to-one practice of calligraphic *meşk* (exercise) – which will be analysed in chapter three, section three – was carried out, through which the student was copying the master and calligraphic albums of the Ottoman tradition. A nineteenth-century account penned by one of the students of the school is relevant to the topics that will emerge in this study. The account emphasises spiritual elements of the art, such as the qualities of concentration, good manners (*adab*), and morality.[53] It also reports that two-hundred-and-eighty students were enrolled in the school, and that formal ceremonies for the attainment of the *ijāza* were organised.[54] During every Ramadan a calligraphic exhibition was prepared.[55] The Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn was closed in 1924, under the execution of the order to shut all of the madrasas. It was reopened eight months later under the less religious

[53] Mesara, 'A. Süheyl Ünver'in Medresetü'l-HattâTîn Hatıraları', 29, 32, 44.
[54] Mesara, 27, 36–40.
[55] Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı', 121.

name Hattat Mektebi, thanks to the efforts of Necmeddin Okyai.[56] The school was closed again in 1928 because of the abolition of the Arabic alphabet. After several months it was reopened as Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi (Academy of Fine Arts),[57] until its definitive closure in 1936.

In 1925 all the dervish lodges were also banned and closed by the State.[58] The Sufi *tekke*s served several roles in Ottoman societies, including the promulgation of arts. Music, poetry, and calligraphy were practised by Sufis, as elements of their spiritual lives. Since the calligraphic training is an educational system transmitted from master to disciple, some Sufi elements can still be detected in some aspects of the art, as it will be demonstrated in the rest of this work. However, with the closure of the *tekke*s no calligrapher is able to experience anymore the calligraphic training within a Sufi institution, and within a whole mystical system of spiritual development.

Until the constitution of the Republic, the relationship between calligraphers and the State had always been secured: calligraphers were patronised for the production of multiple calligraphic creations, for teaching the art of writing to imperial scribes, and for writing imperial edicts signed with the Sultan's emblem. However, the calligrapher was not only working for the State. With the aim of not exhausting his creativity and in order to propagate the art, a master was also passing for free his knowledge to his pupils, through the process of private teaching, completed by the student with the achievement of the *ijāza*.[59] With the political and cultural change brought by the Republic, and by the closure of the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn, the calligraphers' only option was to carry out the art privately, without any other support.

During the early years of the Republic, Turkey experienced a period during which Ottoman and Islamic arts were neglected. Traditional arts were considered outdated, and the artistic interest was directed towards the West for new art

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[56] Mesara, 'A. Süheyl Ünver'in Medresetü'l-HattâTîn Hatıraları', 43.
[57] Griffith, 'Calligraphy and the Art of Statecraft in the Late Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkish Republic', 611.
[58] Dogan, 'The Establishment of Kemalist Autocracy and Its Reform Policies in Turkey', 222–26.
[59] Griffith, 'Calligraphy and the Art of Statecraft in the Late Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkish Republic', 605–6.

expressions. In multiple ways, the process of secularisation was leading Turkey to separate itself from its Islamic past.[60] The general understanding and appreciation for calligraphy decreased dramatically: people were not able to read calligraphic pieces anymore, and its religious dimension was seen as a vestige of the past. According to Kılıç, no space was left for calligraphy in the social life.[61] He also added that 'my master's master, Necmeddin Okyay, and many others, like İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer, were quite hopeless. They spent their lives in a period when Islamic arts were dying. They were almost sadly begging students to learn, for the sake of the old times.'[62]

When Hamid Aytaç passed away in 1982, he was the very last calligrapher left from the Ottoman era. His final desire had been to be buried close to the tomb of Şeyh Hamdullah. Aytaç's numerous students reported memories about their master, collected by Eriş in the monograph devoted to the great calligrapher.[63] Multiple examples of Aytaç's calligraphic works written in all the styles of the Ottoman tradition are displayed in Eriş's study. Aytaç is described as a lonely man, who was working constantly in his small dusty office in Eminönü, heated only by a gasoline stove during winter time.[64] His interactions with the outer world were taking place only with his students, and when he was going out to eat at a restaurant.[65] He struggled with financial issues, especially at the end of his life, trying to earn a living producing business cards and writing book titles in Latin script. His commissions for works in Islamic calligraphy were limited.

Five hundred years of the artistic tradition that adorned the capital of one of the most powerful empires, and that was executed with pomp and glory in imperial palaces and mosques, ended in a small, dirty and cold workplace, infested with rats.[66] However, the phoenix of Islamic calligraphy was destined to be raised again from its dust.

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[60] Malise Ruthven and Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 115.
[61] Kılıç 32:45.
[62] Kılıç 35:57.
[63] Muin N Eriş, ed., *Hat sanatında vazifeli bir hattat: Hamid Aytaç (A calligrapher on duty in art of calligraphy: Hamid Aytaç)* (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2011), 150–238.
[64] Eriş, 163.
[65] Eriş, 75.
[66] Eriş, 192.

1.3 The Contemporary Turkish Calligraphic Tradition

As it has been shown in the previous section, from the Twenties to the Seventies, many calligraphers lost their jobs, and the number of people interested in pursuing the art decreased dramatically. In this section I will illustrate how the art continued to develop until the contemporary era. I will first present how the students of the previous generation of calligraphers kept the tradition alive. I will then introduce the institutions and schools opened in the Eighties, which stimulated the revival in Islamic calligraphy. Some of these institutions, as the IRCICA, has been organising international competitions attracting an average attendance of hundreds of calligraphers. The IRCICA brought the attention back to the Turkish traditional artistic heritage. I will finally present the biographies of the calligraphers I have interviewed, living masters acclaimed all over the world.

The masters who received their licenses from the calligraphers of the nineteenth century, continued to privately teach the art in the same way as they received its knowledge: using the same tools, the same media and the same textual contents of their predecessors. In Turkey the transmission of the art, from master to pupil, lasted until the present day without any rupture.[67] The most important element in the promulgation of the art is the direct teaching of a master, instructed by a previous master, as Ferhat Kurlu affirmed: 'It is all about the instructor, if you have an instructor, then you have training. If not, the heritage of the art ceases.'[68] As far as the textual material is concerned, Hasan Çelebi affirmed that it consists 'mostly of Quranic verses. Secondarily we use traditions, and rarely poems or other sayings.'[69] He also added that poems and sayings in Turkish are not convenient to be shaped in circles or other forms other than lines, because of the lack of vertical strokes, common in Arabic because of the presence of the article *al-* (ال).[70] Savas Çevik,

[67] Kurlu 3:32
[68] Kurlu 6:14.
[69] Çelebi 52:20.
[70] See also Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Iconography of Religions. Section XXII, Islam: Fasc.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 3.

together with all the other calligraphers that I have interviewed, affirmed that the preference is to portray the Quran because of its holiness and universality.[71]

In contemporary Turkey the main places where to study the traditional stream of calligraphy are Istanbul and Konya, as confirmed by Hüseyin Öksüz: 'The centre for calligraphy is Istanbul. Then Konya. These two are the centres for calligraphy addicts [*laughs*].'[72] Notwithstanding that the heritage of the art continued in Turkey, not numerous people are practicing calligraphy today, because of the obvious obstacle related to learning a different language and a different script. Around one thousand people in total, considering instructors and students, are dedicating themselves to the art of penmanship.[73] Among those, only around twenty or thirty masters are able to make of calligraphy their first and foremost occupation.[74]

From the Eighties, the Turkish government and religious foundations established new schools and institutions with the aim of preserving and transmitting the heritage of Turkish traditional arts. Among the schools which are active in the contemporary period, and in which some of the masters I have interviewed are teaching the art, or the history of the art, are the Caferağa Medresesi, the Klasik Sanatlar Merkezi, the Klasik Türk Sanatları Vakıf, and the IRCICA. In particular, the IRCICA has been founded not only by the Turkish government, but also by the international Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1980. Moreover, calligraphy can be studied in Municipality courses, and at a university level at the Fine Arts Department of Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul, and at the Seljuk University in Konya.

In schools and institutions, the traditional one-to-one practice of calligraphic *meşk* continued. I observed the training at the IRCICA, and at the Caferağa Medresesi, where Ferhat Kurlu and Efdaluddin Kılıç respectively have been teaching. I witnessed a very relaxed and positive atmosphere. In chapter three, section three, I will detail how the practice of the art has been carried out.

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[71] Çevik 36:43.
[72] Öksüz I, 36:25.
[73] Kurlu 4:58.
[74] Private conversation with Kılıç.

From 1987, IRCICA sponsored international calligraphic competitions, in the name of one of the great calligraphers of the past. Ten competitions have been held so far, in 1987, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2016.[75] These competitions attract every year around nine-hundred works from all over the world in different style categories. The last competition awarded one-hundred-thirteen participants from eighteen countries, with around two-hundred-thousand American dollars, distributed in thirty-eight prizes, thirty-three mentions, and fifty-one incentive awards.[76] Among the calligraphers I have interviewed, some have been judges in these competitions, such as Derman, Çelebi, Başar, and Özçay, and others won several prizes as participants. Furthermore, in 2014 the IRCICA coordinated the International Gathering on the Art of Calligraphy in Istanbul, designed as a composite event involving panels, workshops, exhibitions, presentations of *ijāza* and study visits.[77] The gathering attracted calligraphers from all over the world. Istanbul is today, as it was during the Ottoman period, the internationally renowned centre for the study of Islamic calligraphy.

Now I will present the biographies of some of the most important masters of calligraphy in Turkey. I have ordered them according to the year they received their first license to teach the art.

Uğur Derman

Derman was born in 1935. He is not practicing and teaching the art anymore. He is presently one of the greatest academic authorities on the history of Ottoman calligraphy. He devoted his efforts to study calligraphy and Turkish traditional arts as a historian. Derman is one of the art advisors of the IRCICA and an honorary

[75] 'Competitions', Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, accessed 28 August 2017, https://www.ircica.org/competitions/irc618.aspx.
[76] 'IRCICA's Tenth International Calligraphy Competition in the Name of Hafiz Osman', Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, accessed 29 August 2017, https://www.ircica.org/ircicas-tenth-international-calligraphy-competition-in-the-name-of-hafiz-osman-finalized-and-winners-announced--17-may-2016/irc1113.aspx.
[77] 'IRCICA International Gathering on the Art of Calligraphy', Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, accessed 19 August 2017, https://www.ircica.org/ircica-international-gathering-on-the-art-of-calligraphy-/irc1061.aspx.

professor at the Mimar Sinan University. Some of his numerous academic publications have been used in this study.

Derman learned to read and write Ottoman and Arabic from Mahib İz, elder brother of Fahir İz, who is the author of the Oxford Turkish Dictionary. He revealed to me that he spent his time wandering in Istanbul with the aim of reading all the inscriptions on monuments, fountains, tombstones, mosques and buildings. In 1955, he became student of Necmeddin Okyay, who was from Üsküdar, where Derman was living too at that time. He obtained his *ijāza* in 1960 in *ta'lîk*, which has been published by Blair.[78] He also benefitted from the guidance of Halim Özyazıcı and Macid Ayral (1891–1961).

Hasan Çelebi

Çelebi was born in 1937 in the city of Erzurum, in eastern Turkey. He is an imam, and the most famous master of Islamic calligraphy in the world. His works have been exhibited in multiple cities and countries, comprising Istanbul, Malay, Jordan, Baghdad, and Kuwait. He decorated manifold mosques with his calligraphies in different locations, in and outside Turkey, including the mosque of Kuba in Medina.[79] This is how he described to me the beginning of his calligraphic career:

> My calligraphic journey proceeded in a random way, and it was full of coincidences. I did not receive any academic training, and I do not know many academic words. Usually students go to the university, they pursue their Masters, and their Ph.Ds. – like you – they can choose the field of calligraphy, either acquiring the art, or studying about the history of the art. But my journey started memorising the Quran, becoming a *ḥāfiẓ*. To develop my training and my knowledge, I came to Istanbul from Erzurum, my birth-land. No matter how much I was passionate with the materials and tools of calligraphy, I promised to my mother and to my father that I would learn the Quran and that I would be trained in Islamic sciences. And then of course at that time the usage of Arabic letters was prohibited and there was no option

[78] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 596.
[79] M. Uğur Derman et al., *Hattın Çelebisi: Hasan Çelebi* (Istanbul: Tarih ve Tabiat Vakfı, 2003), 6–7.

> for us to conduct our art. I was hopeless because I have learned that the art of calligraphy could be studied only in universities, in art departments, but I did not receive a university education, and I did not find any other school. When I met Hamid Aytaç in 1964, he became the gate to my journey in calligraphy.[80]

Çelebi was initially sent by Aytaç to Halim Özyazıcı, student of Aytaç and İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer. Unfortunately, Özyazıcı died four months later. When Çelebi returned to Aytaç, he wrote for two years the prayer *Rabbi yessir*, without moving to his second lesson.[81] In 1970, he received his first *ijāza* in *sülüs* and *nesih*. In 1975, he received his second *ijāza* in *rıkâ'* and *ta'lîk* from Kemal Batanay, who studied with Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan.

Çelebi instructed around five-hundred students during his life. However, only around ninety students obtained the *ijāza* from him. Around half of his students are from Turkey, and the other half from countries all over the world, such as America, Japan, Africa, and many other countries in the Middle East.[82]

Hüseyin Kutlu

During our interview, Kutlu did not desire to talk about himself. When I asked to him to talk about his artistic journey, the following has been his reply: 'I think this is not important. You will hear the same things from everybody else, so this is not important. We are speaking about this subject in a very deep way, so other than these deep emotions, nothing is important.'[83] Kutlu embraced Sufism, but he did not reveal to me his *ṭarīqa*.

Kutlu was born in Konya in 1949. He graduated in Philosophy from Istanbul University in 1974. He obtained a license in *sülüs* and *nesih in* 1980 from Aytaç, and in *ta'lîk* in 2002 from Derman. He became the imam of Sokollu Şehit Mehmet Paşa Mosque in 1972, and in 1976 the imam of Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa Mosque. As a

[80] Çelebi 06:22.
[81] Derman et al., *Hattin Çelebisi*, 4.
[82] Çelebi 01:12:26.
[83] Kutlu 01:35:14.

calligrapher, he organised various exhibitions and conferred eighteen licenses to his students. Numerous mosques display his works in several countries, such as the United States, Japan, Chechnya, Germany and Russia. Among the mosques in Turkey that have been adorned with Kutlu's calligraphies, we can mention the Şakirin Mosque, and the Mimar Sinan Mosque in Istanbul, and the Ahmet Hamdi Akseki Mosque in Ankara. In 2015, Kutlu received a Presidential award in recognition of his cultural and artistic contributions.[84]

Savaş Çevik

Çevik was born in Antalya in 1953. After he finished high school in Aydem, he decided to move to Istanbul in order to study painting at the Fine Arts Academy, from which he graduated in 1976. He mentioned to me that at that time he was more interested in painting and graphics, rather than calligraphy. During his studies, he met Emin Barın, professor of typography and calligraphy. Barın introduced Çevik to classical Ottoman calligraphy and modern typography. Çevik was fascinated by the fact that some calligraphers were able to see a fortieth part of a millimetre. The interest for calligraphy gradually grew in Çevik, to the extent that his professor introduced him to Kemal Batanay in 1973. Çevik started the study of *rıkâ'* and *ta'lîk* with Batanay. He subsequently studied *sülüs* and *nesih* with Aytaç, and *dîvânî* and *celî dîvânî* with Professor Ali Alpaslan from Istanbul University. He also benefitted from the knowledge of Derman. In 1987, Çevik won the first prize and two mention prizes at the first International Calligraphy Competition organised by IRCICA.

Today, Çevik teaches at the Department of Graphic Arts, Haliç University. He also teaches at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (ISMEK), and he guides some private students. At the time of our interview, he had around forty University students, twenty-five at the ISMEK, and fifteen private students. He mentioned that hundreds of people asked for his experience and guidance.[85]

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[84] 'Hüseyin Kutlu', Kalem Güzeli, accessed 22 August 2017, http://www.kalemguzeli.org/index.php?go=main&KNO=67.
[85] Çevik 01:13:38.

Fuat Başar

Başar was born in 1953 in Erzurum, where he lived until the completion of high school. His dream was to become a physicist, and at that time he could not foresee calligraphy at all in his life. Since he could not afford to move to another city to study physics, he decided to study medicine at the Atatürk University. Başar recalled that during the fifth year of the university, in 1976, his life changed: he randomly picked up in a bookshop the volumes of a work about calligraphy, titled *Kalem Güzeli*.[86] He was extremely fascinated by those books. He did not know Arabic, but for a long time he delightedly contemplated those beautiful art pieces. Being amazed and interested by the calligraphic artwork, he decided to buy the books. Başar added that

> After the bookshop, I went to a tea place called Emirgan Çay Bahçesi and I sat down to take a look at the books. There were two unoccupied tables, and someone came and sat down. Later another person came, saying '*salam 'aleykom*', and sat down. The one who came later recited a poem to the one who sat on the other table. I have later learned that those lines were from the poet Yunus Emre:
>
> *I used to yearn for God;*
> *If I found Him, what then?*[87]
>
> Even though I was lost in the books, I have clearly heard those lines. And at that table I decided that I would have learnt calligraphy. I was so fascinated by my books that I did not hear what those two people were talking about, a part from those lines of poetry. It was destiny.[88]

Başar started to copy the works portrayed in *Kalem Güzeli*, but without success, since it is not possible to learn the art without the guidance of a master. He received a proper *kalem* as a gift from a book seller, a gift that he still treasures.

[86] Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1972; Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1974; Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1989.
[87] İsteridüm Allâh'ı buldumısa ne oldı / Ağlarıdum dün ü gün güldümise ne oldı.
[88] Başar 14:04.

Rejected by the only calligrapher he knew in Erzurum, he swore to himself that he would have found the best calligrapher in the world. When he heard about Hamid Aytaç, he started to send to him his works, through one of Aytaç's students who was living in Erzurum. Aytaç would send back the works by mail, with his corrections and comments. The process was too slow. For this reason, Başar decided to leave school, and he moved to Istanbul. After some years of serious study, he received his *ijāza* in 1980. Başar continued to follow the guidance of Aytaç until the latter passed away in 1982. In 1989, he also obtained a license in paper marbling. Since then, he teaches calligraphy and marbling in his workshop.

Hüseyin Öksüz (Konya)

Öksüz met his master Hamid Aytaç in Istanbul, during his university pharmacology education in 1969. He decided to study calligraphy, and he was accepted as Aytaç's student. Öksüz described their relationship as a *şeyh-mürid*[89] and father-son relationship. He studied for eleven years, and he received his *ijāza* in *nesih* and *sülüs* in 1980. His second master was Uğur Derman, with whom he studied *ta'lîk* from 1969 to 2000, year of the achievement of his second *ijāza*. Since Öksüz was living in Konya, he needed to travel to Istanbul from time to time. He was also sending his works via mail, receiving them back with corrections and comments. For these reasons his training took a long time. Furthermore, he added that 'Uğur *hoca* (master/teacher) is very choosy and hard to please. He is like a father to me. He is such a gentleman. In Turkish we say *İstanbul Efendisi* (a gentleman from Istanbul), which we use for men who are well-behaved, civilised, polite and kind. There are not many *İstanbul Efendisi* left in this world.'[90] Öksüz is now an art professor at the Seljuk University in Konya.

[89] See chapter five, section one.
[90] Öksüz I, 7:10.

Öksüz is very proud of their students. He described them as 'excellent calligraphers who reached the highest places in international competitions.'[91] Around twenty Öksüz's students have received their licenses from him.

Mehmed Özçay

Özçay was born in 1961 and grew up in Gerede, in the Bolu province, where he lived until the last year of high school. He described his family as a religious, devout Muslim family. Since childhood Özçay was attracted to music and painting. He attended a religious high school, called Imam Hatip, where he studied Arabic. Furthermore, Özçay decided to continue his religious studies at a university level, entering into the school of Theology at the Atatürk University, in Erzurum. At the end of the Seventies, he came across the book *Kalem Güzeli*, which played a crucial role in his formation: in those pages he saw the most extraordinary calligraphic works and he felt to be very affected and inspired by them. Since he did not know anybody who was an expert in the field, he was practicing calligraphy on his own, copying those works. He found that there was something special and attractive behind those shapes, something inexplicable and spiritual. In 1982, while he was carrying on his theological studies, his passion (*aşk*) for calligraphy and thirst for knowledge (*iştiyakla*) conducted him to meet Fuat Başar, thanks to a common friend.[92] For the first time, he started the practice (*meşk*) of calligraphy under the guidance of a master. Since then, calligraphy became his first and foremost priority in life. He continued the study of *nesih* and *sülüs*, and in 1986 he moved to Istanbul, where he studied with Uğur Derman. In the same year, he was asked to write an entire Quran, a *muṣḥaf*, by a publishing company. In the first place he rejected the offer, because he thought that his abilities were not mature enough, but then he accepted under the insistence of the publisher. He described the time spent in writing an entire Quran (from 1987 until 1991), as the peak of his spiritual and emotional

[91] Öksüz I, 20:00.
[92] Özçay 06:52.

life.[93] In 1986 and 1989, Özçay participated in the International Calligraphy Competitions organised by IRCICA, winning six prizes, among which the first prize in *nesih* and *sülüs*. He subsequently served as a judge in the international competitions organised by IRCICA. He achieved international fame, participating in several exhibitions, in Turkey, in the Middle East and all around the world. Hundreds of his works in *celî sülüs*, *sülüs*, *nesih*, *rıkâ'*, and *celî dîvânî*, have been acquired by museums and collectors. In his studio he works together with his brother Osman, renowned calligrapher, and his sister Fatma, renowned illuminator. Özçay revealed to me his inherent sense of fulfilment: 'what is satisfying to me is seeing that a new generation of artists in calligraphy has been inspired by my artwork. Sometimes I talk to myself, and I think that I have done something in my life. Something has been achieved.'[94]

Efdaluddin Kılıç

Kılıç was born in 1968 in Istanbul, where he studied Theology at Marmara University, from which he graduated in 1990. In 1984, he started to study calligraphy with Prof Hüsrev Subaşı, student of Aytaç. After a couple of months, he was sent to Hasan Çelebi. Kılıç considers his master as 'the most well-known and respected calligrapher in the world. He is the *sheikh* of calligraphy today.'[95] In 1983, Kılıç obtained his *ijāza* in *sülüs* and *nesih*. He also studied *rıkâ'* with Muhittin Serin. In 1994, Kılıç won a mention prize at the International Calligraphy Competition organised by IRCICA. He wrote a sixty-four-meter-long composition in *sülüs* for the Üç Şerefeli Mosque in Edirne. Kılıç teaches calligraphy at the Caferağa Medresesi since 1988. He is active in the promulgation of the art leading workshops in Turkey and abroad, and he has participated to several exhibitions.

[93] For an example of two pages from the Quran he wrote, see Mehmed Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, trans. İrvin Cemil Schick and Nabil F. Safwat (Istanbul: Mehmed Özçay, 2007), 32–33.
[94] Özçay 14:22.
[95] Kılıç 01:54.

Ayten Tiriyaki

Tiriyaki was born in 1961 in Ordu, on the Black Sea. She moved to Amasya, birth-land of Şeyh Hamdullah, to become a high-school teacher. She was very attracted to painting. After she graduated, she studied Theology at the University of Ankara, and she started to be interested in calligraphy. She could not recollect exactly what led her to that path, but she believes that the *baraka* (spiritual power) of Şeyh Hamdullah stimulated a passion for learning calligraphy. In 1983, Muçte Baur, her university professor, suggested to her to move to Istanbul, where one of his friends, Hasan Çelebi, was a living master of calligraphy. After finishing her studies, she moved to Istanbul, with the only aim of learning calligraphy. To make a living, she applied to be a professor of Islamic Studies at a high-school level. Since she was wearing a hijab, during the headscarf prohibition in Turkey, she could not be employed by the State. Therefore, she decided to be a *madrasa* teacher in Üsküdar. By chance, her work place was only one-hundred-and-fifty metres close to the mosque where Hasan Çelebi was working as an imam. Thus, in 1983, she started her training in calligraphy, and she obtained her *ijāza* in 1989 in *nesih*. She improved successively her knowledge of *sülüs.* In the meanwhile, she also studied *tezhip* with Prof Çiçek Derman and İnci Ayan Birol. She obtained in total three *ijāza:* two in *tezhip* and one in calligraphy. In her *tezhip ijāza* from İnci, she used both *nesih* and *sülüs*. She received an encouragement prize in *nesih* during the fifth International Calligraphy Competition organised by IRCICA.

Six of her students received their licenses in calligraphy, and fourteen in illumination. She trains her students once a week in her studio, which is also a renowned shop where calligraphers can buy their implements.

Ferhat Kurlu

Kurlu was born in 1976. He studied Theology at the Dokuz Mayıs University and he is presently an imam. He studied in Samsun, where he was not able to find a calligraphy master. His family decided to migrate to Istanbul, where Kurlu was introduced to Hasan Çelebi by one of his friends. He mentioned to me that masters

do not accept everyone as a student. They rather prefer to receive a reference from a respected person before starting to train someone. In 1996, Kurlu was accepted as a student and he started his training. In 2000, he obtained his license from Çelebi in *sülüs* and *nesih*. Ten years later, in 2010, he achieved his second *ijāza* in *ta'lîk*. Kurlu has participated in several group exhibitions, in Turkey and abroad, and he has been awarded with numerous prizes in national and international competitions. He is a calligraphy master at IRCICA. At the end of our interview, his young son entered into the studio, and he sat on the lap of his father. Kurlu, who was showing to me his works at that moment, said to me: 'this is my last art piece (*son asar*), a master piece'. He paused, he kissed his child's forehead, and then he added: 'no, sorry. This is a master piece of Allah.'[96]

Hilal Kazan

Kazan was born in Istanbul, and she graduated in Turkish Language and Literature from Istanbul University. She completed her doctoral degree in 2007, in Turkish and Islamic Arts, at Marmara University.

Kazan started her journey in calligraphy as a student of Müşerref Çelebi (1915–2007), probably the first woman calligrapher during the Republic times.[97] Müşerref Çelebi did not have an *ijāza*: she trained with Halim Özyazıcı, and then with Hamid Aytaç, but without completing her training. Since Kazan comes from a traditional religious family, her father did not allow her to study with a male calligrapher. Hence, a family friend advised Kazan to contact Müşerref Çelebi. Müşerref accepted her as a student, and every Friday Kazan would join her master at her place to study calligraphy. Kazan mentioned that she took many blessings (*feyz*) from Müşerref: a very loving, kind and generous woman. Müşerref had seven children, and five generations of family members were living together in the same house, where Müşerref was overloaded with duties. Often visitors were staying at her place, sometimes for days, sometimes for months. For these reasons, Kazan realised

[96] Kurlu 52:31.
[97] Hilal Kazan, *Dünden Bugüne Hanım Hattatlar (Female Calligraphers Past And Present)* (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2010), 95–98.

that she needed to find a master who could properly train her, but she could not emotionally let Müşerref go. When Kazan's father realised that his daughter was passionate and very serious about calligraphy, he decided to accept her to be trained by a man, and a family friend introduced Kazan to Hasan Çelebi (not related to Müşerref Çelebi) in 1994. Kazan recalled that

> One day I visited him with my old calligraphic exercises (*meşk*). He looked at my exercises, he thought, for some time, in silence, and then he said "I understand you have spent a lot of time training with Müşerref Çelebi. I am sorry to tell you that, but this not calligraphy. Your hand had been trained, but in the wrong way. If you want to continue with me, you must restart from the beginning. If you accept that, I am here, if not, I cannot train you."[98]

Kazan revealed to me that in that very moment she felt that all the world was crashing down on her. However, she also thought that she spent ten years of her life on calligraphy, and she did not want to throw her passion and her efforts away. 'There were no chances left, I had to restart from the beginning. So, I said "Yes". What could I have said? I restarted with tracing the dots, single letters, and combinations of letters…'[99] Kazan affirmed that even though the calligraphic tools used by the two masters were the same, the proportions that geometrically govern the construction of letters, were different. Kazan obtained her *ijāza* in 2000 in *nesih* and *sülüs*, becoming the second woman who has been taught by Çelebi. Kazan is presently carrying out the study of *dîvânî* as well.

She is a scholar on Islamic calligraphy, who published several books and articles in the field. Among those, she wrote an interesting study on the history of female calligraphers, from the past to the present days.[100] She also wrote a monograph on her master.[101] Among her contributions in English, she recently wrote

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[98] Kazan 22:37.
[99] Kazan 23:20.
[100] Kazan, *Dünden Bugüne Hanım Hattatlar (Female Calligraphers Past And Present)*.
[101] Hilal Kazan, *Noktalar ve Çizgiler Arasında Hasan Çelebi* (Istanbul: İstanbul Ticaret Odası, 2013).

a chapter in the work edited by Schick and Gharipour on calligraphy and architecture in the Muslim world.[102]

Fatih Özkafa (Konya)

Özkafa was born in Konya in 1974. He began to study calligraphy in 1994 with Hüseyin Öksüz, receiving his *ijāza* in 2002 in *nesih* and *sülüs*. After the attainment of the license he started to study with Mehmed Özçay too, practicing *dîvânî*, *celî dîvânî*, and *ta'lîk*. He obtained incentive prizes in *sülüs* in the sixth and eight International Calligraphy Competitions organized by IRCICA. He received also an incentive prize at the third Albaraka calligraphic competition in 2012. In 2016 he won the third prize in the tenth IRCICA international competition, in *muhakkak* and *reyhânî*. He pursued his doctoral degree in Traditional Turkish Arts at the Institute of Art History, Seljuk University. In 2005 he became a lecturer, teaching traditional Islamic calligraphy at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Seljuk University. He is presently the Head of Department.

Özkafa has presently around forty private students, to whom he teaches both classic and modern calligraphy.

Aburrahman and Seyit Ahmet Depeler (Konya)

The brothers Seyit Ahmet and Aburrahman have narrated to me their stories as one story. They stated that their grandfather was a calligrapher and a close friend of Hüseyin Öksüz. Thus, calligraphy has been always present in their lives. During high school they started to learn the art with Öksüz, performing the prayer *Rabbi yessir* for three months. They both carried out their studies at a university level too, attending the faculty of Fine Arts at Seljuk University, and also privately with their master.

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[102] Hilal Kazan, 'On the Renewal of the Calligraphy at the Mosque of the Prophet (Al-Masjid Al-Nabawī) under the Reign of Sultan Abdülmecid', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

Abdurrahman learned *sülüs*, *nesih*, *rıkâ'*, and *dîvânî* and he obtained his *ijāza* in 2004 in *sülüs* and *nesih*. In 2005, Abdurrahman started to study *celî sülüs* with Davut Bektaş in Istanbul. When he visits Istanbul, he also has regularly meetings with Mehmed and Osman Özçay, and Ali Toy, receiving guidance from them. He works at the calligraphy collection possessed by Sami Tokgöz in Konya, restoring old calligraphic works.

Seyit Ahmet started to practice calligraphy in 1999, after his older brother, with Tahir Güçlü. From 2000 to 2006, he continued to study with his master Hüseyin Öksüz. At the Seljuk University, he received lessons both from Öksüz and Fatih Özkafa, with whom he studied *dîvânî* and *celî dîvânî*.

After they both finished to serve at the military, they opened their own studio, in 2012, in Konya. Now they train their own students. At the time of our interview, they were beginning to study *ta'lîk* with Öksüz.

They both won numerous prestigious awards in competitions. In 2016, they both reached the first prize at the IRCICA international competition: Abdurrahman in *celî sülüs* and Seyit Ahmet in *celî dîvânî*.

Soraya Syed (United Kingdom)

Syed was born in London in 1976. She was passionate about arts since childhood. Syed comes from a religious family: her mother was French Catholic, and she converted to Islam when her children were older. Syed's father is originally from Pakistan, and a Muslim. Thus, Syed was brought up within two faiths. When she was young, her father sent her to a *madrasa* to learn Arabic, but it has been described as a negative experience by Syed, putting her off from Islam. Around seventeen, Syed started to reflect deeply about human beings' purpose in life. Her reflections led her to return to Islam. Today, Syed identifies herself with Sufism.[103] For some inexplicable reasons, in the aforementioned period of personal reflection, Syed felt a strong attraction towards Islamic calligraphy, but she had no idea how to begin its study. The turning point in her life was performing, with her family, the Pilgrimage

[103] Syed 26:37.

(*umrah*). Syed mentioned that 'they say that the first thing you pray for, when you see the *Kaaba,* it becomes true. And I just remember myself seated in front of the *Kaaba*, praying that I would return one day there with the knowledge of the Arabic language, and having read the Quran in Arabic.'[104] She indeed returned some years later to South Arabia, giving tuition on Islamic calligraphy to members of the Royal Family.

In 1995 she started studying Arabic, and she started a Master's programme in Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts at the Prince's School in London. In 2000, Efdaluddin Kılıç, who was visiting the UK, taught an intensive course in Norwich, which was attended by Syed. After two weeks of study, Syed continued her training via mail. She was sending works to him to Istanbul, and she was receiving from him corrections and comments. The process was too slow. In 2001, Syed decided to move to Istanbul, and she lived there for four years, until she obtained her license in 2005.

> Everything happened with such an ease, leading me to the right direction. For example, I went to Istanbul with my father to see if I could live there, and I was looking for a place to stay. It was Ramadan, and full of tourists. My father wanted to leave me in Istanbul in safe hands. I started to talk to the man at the reception of my hotel, and he told me that his sister would be delighted to have me at her place! In a few hours, I had the keys of the house! In calligraphy everything happened like that, with ease and fluidity. There is such a *baraka* around this art. Only when I tried to go against it, things did not go right, and then I examined my intentions.[105]

Soraya now lives in London, with her husband and children. She teaches the traditional art in seminars and workshops, and she is also experimenting the marriage between Islamic calligraphy and new media, with the belief that the *baraka* of the craft will be still infused in her work.[106]

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[104] Syed 5:32.
[105] Syed 14:44.
[106] Syed 33:00.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated the development of Islamic calligraphy in Turkey, from its Ottoman past to the present, showing the element of continuity, and discussing its critical phase during the early years of the Republic.

I provided a brief overview of the art in Anatolia, before the rise of the Ottomans, presenting the existence of a calligraphic tradition in Konya during the Seljuk period. I subsequently provided some fundamental notions on the Ottoman tradition of calligraphy, highlighting the relevance of the patronage carried out by Ottoman Sultans. Bayezid II (reigned 1481–1512), son of Mehmet II the Conqueror, requested to his calligraphy master, Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520), to elaborate new styles in the art of penmanship. I discussed the spiritual experiences of the Sufi calligraphy master, leading to mystical visions which unveiled to him a new artistic direction. His reinterpretation of Islamic calligraphy became the foundation for the future developments of the art until the present, in Turkey.

Şeyh Hamdullah's artistic production consisted in books (Qurans and prayer books), *kıt'alar* (single calligraphic pieces), calligraphic albums, and monumental inscriptions. The calligraphers who practiced the art after him, continued to use these media, adding to this list the *levha* (a calligraphic panel to be hanged on walls), only in the nineteenth century.

I discussed the following important calligraphy masters who led the development of the art after its originator: Ahmed Karahisârî (1469–1556), Hâfiz Osman (1642–1698), Yesârî Mehmed Es'ad Efendi (d. 1798), and Mustafa Râkım Efendi (1757–1826). Mustafa Râkım, patronised by the sultans Selim III (reigned 1789–1807) and Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839), was a successor of the school of Hâfiz Osman. The present Turkish calligraphic tradition is an extension of Mustafa Râkım School. Râkım reached the summit in the design of the imperial *tuğra*, and he perfected the *celî* (large) *sülüs* to be used for larger inscriptions, such as in big panels to be hanged on walls. The largest calligraphic panels in the world, penned by Kâdiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876), and hanged in Ayasofya, are outstanding examples of this new media. The present calligraphic tradition is rooted in two figures from the Ottoman times, exponents of Mustafa Râkım School:

Mehmed Şevki Efendi (1829–1887), whose art is seen as a prime example of *sülüs* and *nesih,* and Sâmi Efendi (1838–1912), source of inspiration for the larger scripts in particular, such as *celî sülüs* and *celî ta'lîk.*

I discussed an important institution opened in 1915 by the Şeyhülislam Hayrullah Efendi (the empire's chief religious official): the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn (the Calligraphers' School). The masters who taught in this school conveyed traditional Ottoman arts, such as calligraphy, paper marbling, and illumination, to the masters' masters of the present days. Among these masters, I introduced and briefly discussed Ahmed Kâmal Akdik (1861–1941), the Mevlevi Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan (1869–1940) and İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (1873–1946), all students of Sâmi Efendi. The students of Akdik, Yazgan and Altunbezer, such as Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı (1898–1964), Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976), Kemal Batanay (1893–1981), and Hamid Aytaç (1891–1982), have been some of the last living calligraphers from the Ottoman era.

The rise of the Republic has been detrimental to calligraphy for several reasons. In 1924, under the execution of the order to shut all of the madrasas, the Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn was closed. In 1925, all the dervish lodges were closed too. In 1928, the Arabic script was abolished. Many calligraphers lost their jobs, and the centres that were propagating the art of penmanship, were no longer operating. The relationship between calligraphers and the State changed dramatically: during the Ottoman times calligraphers were patronised by the State, and some of them were prestigious officers of the Empire. During the Republic, no space was left for calligraphers in the social life. However, the calligraphic tradition continued privately. Masters transmitted their knowledge to pupils, leading the most skilled of them to the achievement of the *ijāza*. One of the last masters from the Ottoman era was Hamid Aytaç, who taught the art to the most influential masters of the present. Sadly, he died in poverty, before witnessing the raise of Islamic calligraphy in contemporary Turkey.

From the Eighties, the Turkish government and Islamic religious institutions, such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), invested considerable amount of money in the preservation and promulgation of the art of calligraphy. The IRCICA was funded in Istanbul in 1980, based at the Yıldız Palace. International

calligraphy competitions have been organised since 1987, bringing back the attention to Istanbul as the centre for the study of the art. Other schools have been opened, endowed by religious foundations, such as the Caferağa Medresesi, the Klasik Sanatlar Merkezi, and the Klasik Türk Sanatları Vakıf. Moreover, calligraphy can be studied in Municipality courses, and at a university level.

The Turkish calligraphic tradition is a living tradition. Contemporary calligraphers have preserved the heritage of their art, while expressing their creativity in the present. In the last section I briefly showcased the biographies of the calligraphers that I have interviewed, focusing on their relationship with the art. Some common traits can be highlighted, such as the importance that they all confer to religion in their lives. Many of them are imams, or they have carried out theological studies. Some of them are not only calligraphers, but also internationally respected scholars in the field of art history. Some consider calligraphy as a blessing granted to their lives. Some identify the moment in which they entered into contact with the art, as the effect of Divine Destiny. All of them perceive to be part of a living tradition, connecting their art and their lives with the artistic outpouring of the masters of the past.

CHAPTER TWO

SPIRITUAL MATTER: THE PEN, THE INK, AND THE PAPER

In this chapter the tools essential for the practice of calligraphy will be analysed and connected to spiritual symbols and meanings emerging from the calligraphic experience of living artists and from traditional Islamic thought. A brief overview on the diverse implements used in the art will introduce the importance of, and some spiritual aspects sometimes connected to, those different and copious material tools, such as scissors, pen cases, burnishers, and knifes. The analysis will subsequently be focused on the three specific material elements that can be considered as the essential prerequisites to the performance of the art: the pen, the ink, and the paper. The pen is immersed in the ink, it touches the surface of the paper and it traces the very first unit of Islamic calligraphy, which is the dot; the element that constitutes the unit of measurement and the most fundamental component of letters, as it will be analysed in the third chapter. All those material tools can be considered to be relatively imbued with the Sacred, in different ways, at different levels, and according to different interpretations. The rich symbology that will be presented in this chapter revolves around the idea that the pen can be conceived as an active agent, from which the ink flows, a symbol of knowledge and wisdom, elements which are outpoured on a passive and receptive element, the paper.

According to the renowned and pivotal Turkish calligrapher Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır (1895–1952) 'to make beautiful writing, you must possess – in addition to knowledge and talent – the materials and tools, such as pen, paper and ink. Each of these means has its own special importance in producing beautiful writing and material harmony.'[1] The centrality and importance of the calligraphic tools recurred several times during the interviews and during the numerous and informal conversations I had with living calligraphers. The moment in which, during

[1] Cited in Mary McWilliams and David J Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600-1900* (Houston; New Haven: Museum of Fine Arts; distributed by Yale University Press, 2007), 9.

the artistic journey, a calligrapher sees, touches and experiences the tools for the first time, has been often described to me as foundational and initiatory to undertake the artistic path. In this regard, Mehmed Özçay recounted:

> In 1982, thanks to a friend of mine, I met the calligrapher Fuat Başar. And for the first time I started the practice (*meşk*) of calligraphy under the guidance of a master. For the first time, thanks to him, I saw the *kalem*, the *is*[2], paper, I learnt how to prepare paper with *ahar*[3], and I saw all of the other tools.[4]

Mehmed Özçay recalled that what previously was his simple amateur interest into calligraphy, mainly through books, became something serious and real especially through the introduction to the calligraphic tools by the master Fuat Başar, as if those tools were alchemical elements of a secret science which can be taught only by a living master who knows the proper aim and usage of all those materials. Also Hasan Çelebi recalled the significance of the material tools at the beginning of his artistic journey: 'From childhood, I was always fascinated by pen and paper. I had no idea where this love would take me. In essence, it was this love that threw me into the desert of Islamic calligraphy.'[5] What has been described as a vague fascination towards pen and paper, led Hasan Çelebi to a vast and seemingly unexplored artistic realm, that is, Islamic calligraphy, compared to a desert into which he felt to be thrown. The image of the desert does not only recall the attributes of vastness and limitlessness, but it evokes to me the quality of danger. It is a space into which it is possible to lose the way, if not properly guided by the knowledge of a living master who walked the pathway beforehand, and who wisely knows how to utilise the tools through which that desert can be successfully explored and traversed.

Once the calligrapher has learnt how to use the numerous tools of the art from an accomplished master, the effort is projected into finding the proper harmony

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[2] Soot, or "classical ink" as in the English translation provided by Özçay himself.
[3] A starch substance obtained by white egg and used to confer luminosity, protection, smoothness and endurance to paper. See Mohamed Zakariya, 'Ahar Paper', accessed 19 April 2017, http://mohamedzakariya.com/history/ahar-paper/.
[4] Özçay 08:01.
[5] Soraya Syed, 'Interview: Hasan Çelebi', *Islamica Magazine*, no. 11 (2002): 126.

between all of these tools, sometimes resulting in feelings of satisfaction, beauty and goodness, as expressed by Ayten Tiryaki, and echoing the already mentioned words of advice by Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır:

> Whether I write for myself or for my students, when the performance has been very satisfying, I feel myself peaceful and good (*güzel*). I have the feeling that something is coming together in a good and harmonious way. If pen, ink and paper are in harmony and well bounded to each other, I feel a sense of beauty pervading me.[6]

This chapter will focus on the three aforementioned main tools of the art, but other important tools should also be remembered, with the aim of providing a complete overview of its implements and a general sense of how complex the art is.[7] We can mention, among the relevant calligraphic tools, the inkwell (*hokka*), the pen case (*divit* or *kabur*) and the wooden writing box, the polishing stone (*mühre*) made of agate, jade or onyx and used to polish and smooth the surface of paper, the flat or pointed gold burnisher (*zer mühre*) for polishing gilded decorations or golden scripts on paper, the ruler board (*mastar*) granting the precision of the *ductus* of the script, used especially in poetry and in albums for calligraphic exercise, the cutting plaque or tablet (*makta*) used to cut and shape the nib of the pen, the pen knife (*kalemtras*) used to cut the pen, the stencil (*kalib*) used to apply the personal seal of the calligrapher, the raw silk (*lika*) immersed in the ink pot allowing to collect just the right amount of ink by the immersion of the pen, the gum arabic (*zamk-ı arabi*) and soot (*is*) used for the preparation of the ink, a substance called *ahar* applied on paper in order to confer enduring protection and brightness to it, long paper scissors used to cut the paper to the exact size, parchment (*tirse*), and gold leaf (*altın varak*) used to ornate and illuminate paper.[8]

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[6] Tiryaki 32:32.

[7] For a thorough technical analysis of the calligraphic tools see François Déroche, *Islamic Codicology: An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script* (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2006), 104–10.

[8] For some beautiful examples of the aforementioned tools and materials, see Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 227–59; McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 9–47; Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 41–65.

Some of the aforementioned tools may be decorated with Divine Names, invocations and prayers, and figural symbols connected somehow to the art of calligraphy. In order to exemplify the connection between tools and invocations, I will present several tools from the Ottoman calligraphic practice. It is important to note that the Ottoman traditional tools described below have been mostly replaced by modern tools within the art practice of the contemporary tradition, tools which do not display those divine invocations anymore, and which can be purchased in standard art or stationery shops. Some calligraphers, though, still use some of those traditional tools or prefer to collect Ottoman calligraphic tools, as in the case of the private and beautiful collections of Mehmed Özçay and Uğur Derman.[9] I often observed the presence of traditional pen boxes or paper burnishers in the workshops of some of the calligraphers I interviewed, both in Istanbul and in Konya. The central tools which remain unchanged within the artistic tradition, are definitely the reed, bamboo or large wooden pens, and the paper traditionally prepared with *ahar*. The preparation and the use of traditionally prepared ink can be in some cases substituted by the use of acrylic ink, purchasable in stationery shops, as it will be shown.

Two Ottoman beautiful long paper scissors made of metal and gold, from the nineteenth century and kept at the Sabancı Museum in Istanbul (SSM 195-0421 and SSM 195-0404), display, in the finger-holes and in a calligraphic mirrored composition, the invocations *yā ʿalī* (O ʿAlī!) and *yā fattāḥ* (O Opener!).[10] ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib (601–661), cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muḥammad, is traditionally regarded as the initiator of the art of calligraphy, and *al-ʿalī* is also one of the Arabic ninety-nine Names of God, the Sublime, the Most High or the Exalted (Q. 4:34; 31:30; 42:4; 42:51; 34:23); *al-fattāḥ* is one the Names of God too (Q. 34:26), alluding to God as the Opener, the One Who confers victory, help and mercy, the Conqueror, the One Who unlocks heavenly mysteries and truths.[11] Thus, the calligrapher while cutting the exact amount and format of paper which she or he will need for her or his piece, may invoke the help of God and may remember Him in

[9] It is possible to admire some examples of the Derman private collection in Derman, *Letters in Gold*.
[10] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 242–43.
[11] Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: Al-Maqṣad Al-Asnā Fī Sharḥ Asmā'Allah Al-Ḥusnā*, ed. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 79–80.

preparation to, and at the very beginning of, the creative artistic process, in order to receive the blessing of overcoming difficulties. The handles in the shape of the words *yā fattāḥ* can also be seen as the doorknobs of Ottoman buildings, like in the case of the Sultan Mahmud I Library within Aya Sofia. Several examples of scissors with that invocations exist and are on display in numerous museums in Turkey; Figure 2.1 shows the private collection of Ottoman calligraphic tools owned by Mehmed Özçay and held in his studio, where many of the aforementioned tools may be seen, as well as two examples of paper scissors having that precise invocation.

Figure 2.1 *Private collection of Ottoman calligraphic tools by Mehmed Özçay. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

At the Bursa Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts is also kept a specimen of a long calligraphic pair of scissors displaying the invocation *yā fattāḥ*, as well as at the museum of the Mevlevihanesi tekke (Mevlevi Whirling Dervish hall) in Galata, Istanbul: figure 2.2 shows an example of a nineteenth-century pair of scissors used by Sufi calligraphers in Istanbul, displaying the aforementioned invocation.

Figure 2.2 *Scissors at the Galata Mevlevihanesi tekke museum in Istanbul. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Other examples of divine inscriptions on calligraphic tools and pieces of furniture may be found on pen cases. For instance, a rectangular mid-eighteenth-century Turkish pen case (*divit*) with inkwell attached, kept at the Sabanci Museum (SSM 195-0040), displays an inscription hinting again to the aforementioned Divine Name, the Opener. Below the lid of the inkwell it is possible to read the following prayer in Arabic: 'O God who opens all locked doors, open the door that is the most propitious for me.'[12] Furthermore, on an amethyst on the lid, the word *mā shāʿa'llāh* (God has willed it) is engraved, an expression conveying appreciation, joy and praise, and used in Turkish culture with the aim of averting the evil eye as well. Another Turkish pen box from the same period bares the inscription, reported by Schimmel, *wa ṣabrun jamīlun* (and beautiful patience), which is a portion of a Quranic verse (Q. 12:18), often crystallised in calligraphic panels as well.[13] The importance of the attribute of patience in the calligraphic training will be discussed in detail in chapter five, section two. Other Turkish pen boxes may display the sacred initial formula which all of the suras of the Quran introduce, with the exception of the ninth: the invocation *bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* (in the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful), which has been displayed in calligraphy in abounding and multifold ways, and which will be discussed in detail in chapter six, section one.[14] Another nineteenth-century Turkish black pen box, overlaid in golden and silver floral decorations, showcases a mirrored geometrical inscription of the word *huwa* (He [is]), also displayed in numerous Ottoman mosques and the importance of which is unique in Sufi practices of meditation, in which the practitioner chants the pronoun *huwa* in a rhythmic way, emphasising the total and complete transcendence of God, Who can be better described in His Essence with no attributes – or beyond all attributes – and Who can be indicated in that way with the third person pronoun only.[15]

An example of a visual spiritual symbol displayed on calligraphic tools, comes from pen knives, burnishers and cutting plaques or tablets (singular *makta*)

[12] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 229.
[13] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 168 n. 20.
[14] For some Turkish pen boxes bearing that invocation, see McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 52.
[15] McWilliams and Roxburgh, 57.

used to cut and shape the nib of the pen, all displaying a specific type of turban, the one used to symbolise the spiritual presence of the master Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), called Mevlânâ (our lord) in Turkish.[16] The turban appears in particular in a series of Turkish nineteenth-century cutting tablets made out of ivory and used by Mevlevi calligraphers, where it is possible to notice the Mevlevi turban garnishing the top of the tablets.[17] The trimming or opening of the reed pen, which will be discussed in the following section, is one of the most important moments of the calligraphic preparation and it determines the whole calligraphic trait. It is also reported within the Ottoman tradition that only if the calligrapher possesses a straight, virtuous and good moral character he will be able to correctly cut the nib of the pen with a diagonal and single stroke.[18] The symbol of the turban of the master represents the Guidance and the Presence, granting protection and benediction, through which the mystic calligrapher opens his inner reality to God through a process of spiritual practice and transformation, as he transforms and opens the reed into a writing tool.[19] God is described in the mystical poetry of Rūmī as the Divine Scribe, the One in whose hands the hearts of everyone are like a pen, a pen which will be opened, cut and trimmed by Him 'according to the needs of the page He is going to write, and in the end all the different letters, between A and Z, will form a meaningful text whose content they themselves cannot know.'[20]

Calligraphic storage boxes may bring a variety of religious inscriptions too. For instance, a nineteenth-century Turkish calligraphic box bears the words *ʿawn allāh ʿalayka* (may you have God's assistance); and on another one it is possible to read the verse *alladhī ʿallama bi'l-qalami* (who taught by the Pen) (Q. 96:4), a verse well known by calligraphers and which will be discussed in the following section.[21]

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[16] Ladan Akbarnia, *Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam* (Houston; New Haven; London: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2010), 98–101.
[17] McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 14–18; Akbarnia, *Light of the Sufis*, 98–99.
[18] McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 13; Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1974, 2:170–72.
[19] McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 16.
[20] Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Works of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 83; Akbarnia, *Light of the Sufis*, 99.
[21] McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 48–49.

2.1 The Pen

In this section some technical details will firstly introduce and describe the material features of the pen. The sacredness and the spiritual meanings of the pen will be then demonstrated, as shown in the Quran, in different Islamic traditions and in Islamic thought. Subsequently, the analysis will be devoted to how an important Ottoman calligraphic treatise and Turkish mystical poetry conceive the relevance of the pen and interpret its spiritual symbology. Finally, some light will be shed on two different practices performed by some contemporary calligraphers in relation to the pen and death.

The primary tool in Turkish calligraphy is the pen (*kalem*), sometimes made from bamboo, or more often from a hollow reed, cut between two knots. The geographical origins of the hollow reed are usually river banks or lakes in Iran, Iraq or Egypt. The reed must go through a process of seasoning and steeping like hemp, obtained through immersion in water.[22] Other sources mention the seasoning for a period of four years by burial in horse manure, supposed to keep the temperature constant.[23] The outcome is a hardened reed which assumes a colour between reddish, light brown, dark brown, or black.

The *kalem* most commonly used in the Turkish tradition is from a thin reddish reed, which can be bought, for instance, at the İstanbul Sahaflar Çarşısı, a section of the Grand Bazar of Istanbul devoted to old books and calligraphic tools, adjacent to the Beyazit Mosque. Another well-known shop among calligraphers in Turkey and all around the world is the atelier by Ayten Tiryaki. In her shop it is possible to find all sorts of calligraphic tools, modern and traditional, such as reed, bamboo and large wooden pens, traditional and acrylic ink, different types of paper, knives, and several other relevant tools for the art of calligraphy. In figure 2.3 it is possible to identify some of those aforementioned tools.

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[22] Cl. Huart and A. Grohmann, 'Ḳalam', ed. P. Bearman et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* 4 (1997): 471.
[23] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 7; Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 104.

Figure 2.3 *Calligraphic implements sold at Ayten Tiryaki's shop © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Contemporary masters teach to their students how to choose a suitable reed, suggesting to keep the reed around thirty centimetres in length parallel to a hard-wooden surface and then letting it fall. The sound produced by the reed impacting the surface reveals the quality of the reed itself. A dull sound indicates that the reed is not hard enough or it is cracked inside, while a ringing sound and a bouncing reed reveals that the stick is hard enough, hollow inside and suitable to be cut and to be used as a writing tool. This suggestion has been given to me during my training with Efdaluddin Kılıç, and it has been reported by other sources as well.[24] The reed needs then to be cut, carved and the nib created. On figure 2.4 it is possible to see from the top to the bottom two reeds, and three *kalem*s of different dimension and slightly different colours.

[24] Nassar Mansour, *Sacred Script: Muhaqqaq in Islamic Calligraphy*, ed. Mark Allen (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 150.

Figure 2.4 *Reed pens bought in Istanbul. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

The reed is usually and initially carved by the master for his students. More accomplished students subsequently learn how to master the techniques related to the traditional four moments of the creation of the pen, here summarised as: (i) opening the reed (removing with the knife a section of one of the extremities), (ii) hollowing the nib (removing some reed material from the sides and lower parts of the nib), (iii) splitting the nib (creating with a vertical cut a capillary able to stock some extra ink) and (iv) finally cutting the nib, or conferring to it a specific angle.[25] Every different calligraphic style requires a specific angle of the diagonal inclination of the nib.[26] The pen is cut placing the reed on a hard support, of varying shapes and artistic value, called *makta*, possessing a firm and solid section by which the blade of the knife can be stopped. A *makta* can be seen in figure 2.5, where a simple wooden one possesses a section made out of bone at the centre. Other *makta*s may be completely made of iron, silver, or ivory.[27] The nib of the pen has to be constantly shaped, recut and readjusted, not only in the case of breaking the nib, but also when it loses its

[25] Mansour, 151–57; Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1974, 2:166–73.
[26] Hassan Massoudy, *Calligraphie arabe vivante* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 21–25.
[27] For some beautiful and precious examples of *makta*s see McWilliams and Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, 14–18.

suitable shape and hardness. Thus, knife and *makta* are tools very frequently used in the everyday calligraphic practice.

Figure 2.5 *Wooden makta with bone board. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

The slim reddish reed is not the only one used in the Turkish tradition. Other types of pens allow different artistic outcomes. Those pens can be classified in *cava kalemliri* (a hard and slender thorn of a palm tree originated from Indonesia or Malaysia, affixed to the reed pens and allowing durability and little re-cutting), *kargı kalemler* (bigger, thicker and harder bamboo pens utilised in wider scripts), and *ağaç kalemler* or *tahta kalemler* (wooden carved pens possessing wide nibs utilised in *celî* scripts).[28] These different types of pen can be seen in figure 2.6.

[28] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 8.

Figure 2.6 *Reed pens: ağaç kalemler (bottom left), kargı kalemler (top left), cava kalemliri (adjacent to the wooden pens), and other thin reddish reed pens. © http://mohamedzakariya.com/*

The connection with the religious and spiritual dimensions in relation to the pen, emerged in different and multiple moments of my experience with Turkish calligraphers, epitomised by a statement of Savaş Çevik to me: 'Writing and calligraphy are sacred in this culture. There is a sura in the Quran, the sura of the Pen. This sura demonstrates that the pen, calligraphy and writing are considered to be sacred in Islam.'[29] Kutlu mentioned the same concept and verse, adding that 'If you possess a subtle soul, then you will grasp that sacred Pen mentioned by Allah in the Quran.'[30] Çevik subsequently discussed the verses related to the pen in the Islamic holy book. The first verse of the sura of the Pen starts with the words '*Nūn*. By the pen and that which they inscribe' (Q. 68:1, Figure 2.7), where God Himself swears by the pen and by what commentators interpreted in different ways as angels writing down or recording the actions of men on celestial tablets[31] or by what human beings write with pens in the production of knowledge.[32] The artistic rendition of the verse in *celî sülüs* by Çevik shows the verse at the centre of the composition, surrounded by radiating letters *nūn*s that depart from the centre.

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[29] Çevik 01:20:55.
[30] Kutlu 01:10:56.
[31] The section on paper will clarify the idea of a celestial preserved Tablet (*lawḥ maḥfūz*), a concept of Quranic origins. See specifically Q. 85:22; and also Q. 3:6; 13:39; 43:3.
[32] Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 1401.

Figure 2.7 *Savaş Çevik: Q. 68:1, Turkey, 2006. © Savaş Çevik.*

The analysis and interpretation of this verse by contemporary calligraphers will be soon presented. The very first revelation from Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad mentions the pen as well. 'Recite in the Name of thy Lord Who created, created man from a blood clot. Recite! Thy Lord is most noble, Who taught by the Pen, taught man that which he knew not.' (Q. 96:1-5). On this verse, Çevik affirms that writing by the pen is what conferred literacy, knowledge and development to civilisations, thus the pen should be considered as an outpouring of divine bounty, and possesses a pre-eminence upon reading:

> Writing means culture and literacy, it is something that will save you from being blindfolded and ignorant. Writing is the most important tool which was created in this world to enlighten people, to enlighten societies and cultures. Because the very first verse revealed in the Quran says '*Iqra*' (read!). And how can you read something that has not been written? This means that before the verse was revealed by Allah, there were some things that were already written in the world. Once the Prophet Muhammad went to the cave Ḥirā', and Gabriel brought him the first verse

> from Allah saying '*Iqra!*' (read!). Interestingly the Prophet replied that he was illiterate, rather than asking what he should read. So, this means that before the revelation there were other things written down. That is why writing comes before reading. That is why writing comes always first, before reading. If you have writing, then you have reading, but if you do not have writing, you do not have reading.[33]

Fuat Başar mentioned the same concepts in reference to that verse, reporting traditions from 'Alī suggesting that writing is the most important work human beings can do in this world, and that literacy confers real happiness.[34] He also added that 'literacy is crucial because knowledge has been transmitted and preserved through writing. If there is no writing, there is no civilization.'[35]

Some commentators also interpreted the verse as referring to the celestial words written by God on a pre-existential tablet by a spiritual pen. The revelation to Muhammad granted to him with the power of reading or reciting those pre-existential words. In relation to that, the interpretations of Quran 68:1 point to the pen as the very first thing created by God, before the creation of this world. In the first classical and exhaustive commentary of the Quran written in the tenth century by the Sunni scholar Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (839–923), the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, the interpretation of the pen as the first created thing has been attested, so that He could write on the tablet of existence the events to come.[36] This has been reported by the collector of traditions al-Tirmidhī (824–892) as well: 'The first to be created by God was the Pen. God ordered the Pen to write and the Pen answered, "What shall I write?" God said: "Write the destinies (al-Qadar)".'[37] Also Ibn-Kathīr (c.1300–1373) interprets the pen as predestination (*qadar*), ordained prior to the creation of heaven and earth, specifically highlighting a temporal priority of fifty-thousand years.[38] Other interpretations focus on an essential and ontological priority. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209) in his *Tafsīr al-kabīr* equates the pen with the pre-existential light,

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[33] Çevik 01:20:55.
[34] Başar 56:30.
[35] Başar 57:17.
[36] Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ Al-Bayān*, vol. 29 (Mustafa Halabi and Sons, 1954), 14; Huart and Grohmann, 'Ḳalam'.
[37] Mansour, *Sacred Script*, 149.
[38] Ismael Ibn-Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-ʿAzīm*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966), 79.

the divine first intellect,[39] and in his *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* the pen is described as a photonic reality flashing forth from heaven to earth, and writing in existence all things and events that are happening until the Day of Judgement.[40] The interpretative material presented above is only a narrow selection from a much broader exegetical tradition. All those interpretations see the pen as the instrument of God's creative act, mirrored in the calligraphic experience as the creative act of the pen in the process of creating a calligraphic piece.

The aforementioned interpretations constitute significant elements in the broad development of Islamic thought. Now we will turn more specifically to the Turkish cultural background. One of the most important sixteenth-century Ottoman treatises on calligraphy, the *Menakıb-ı Hünerveran* (Book of Deeds of the Skilful) by Mustafa 'Ali (1541–1600),[41] highlights the importance of the pen and writing from what could be described as a religious perspective and from the point of view of the development of civilization and culture in a broader sense as well, as mirrored today in Savaş Çevik's view on the sacredness and value of the pen and of writing. The treatise reports the verses of the Quran where the pen is mentioned, the importance of writing in relation to the creation of books and in particular to the Quran, conceived as a Tablet where the laws for human beings have been revealed, and subsequently some interesting quotations from Islamic traditions:

> The guardian of the Prophet Imam 'Ali has taught us all the epigram "writing is half of all knowledge," and in so doing has shown us how to show respect for God. And a descendant of Muhammad, Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, may God be pleased with him, is reported to have said that "whether weeping or smiling, I have not seen anything as beautiful as writing." In addition to these, the learned Plato is reported to have said that "the pen overcomes suspicion and ignorance"; the scientist Galen said that "the pen provides the foundation for intelligence and understanding"; and the skilled mathematician Euclid said that "the pen prevents wisdom being lost to silence and

[39] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Al-Kabīr*, vol. 30 (Cairo: Al Azhar University, 1962), 78.
[40] Huart and Grohmann, 'Ḳalam'.
[41] See Aḥmad ibn Mīr-Munshī al-Ḥusaynī, *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise by Qādī Aḥmad, Son of Mīr-Munshī, circa A.M. 1015/A.D. 1606*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky, vol. 3, no.2, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, 1959), 17–18; David J. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 4.

the filled heart being emptied." The philosophers' words of wisdom proclaim that "the minds of humans are under the sharp points of pens."[42]

Another passage from the *Menakıb-ı Hünerveran* resonated with the above views expressed by Çevik and Başar on the pre-eminence of writing over reading: 'It is indisputable that various societies and peoples have developed written language after recognising the superiority of writing, and have held in high esteem pens and writing tablets. They have developed different alphabets and scripts to portray the written languages.'[43]

On a side note, but interestingly enough to be highlighted here, in the *Menakıb-ı Hünerveran* the independent Arabic letter *nūn* mentioned at the beginning of the Quranic verse 68:1, is interpreted to be a reference to the inkpot, because of the similarity between the formal shape of the isolated form of the letter *nūn* (ن) and the inkpot itself.[44] This reading has been testified in an Islamic tradition reported by Ibn-Kathīr as well: 'Verily the first thing that God created is the Pen, then He created the *nūn*, which is the inkpot.'[45]

In Turkish mystical poetry the pen has been related to love imagery, often liken in Fuzûlî's poetry (c. 1494–1556) to the eyelashes of the lover or to the tears of suffering and longing for the beloved.[46] Another very influential Turkish contribution to the enrichment of the pen symbology comes from the mystical poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. His exordium of the Masnavi contributed to the Sufi imagery relating the reed pen to the reed flute, and subsequently connecting music to calligraphy; traces of this comparison are still present in the contemporary calligraphic tradition.[47] The poetry of Rūmī in relation to the reed revolves around the themes of hollowness and musical creativity, longing and separation, and return to the origin:

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[42] Carrol Garrett Fisher, ed., *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing* (East Lansing: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, 1991), 49.
[43] Fisher, 49.
[44] Ali and Akın-Kıvanç, *Muṣṭafá Alī's Epic Deeds of Artists*, 115, 230.
[45] Ibn-Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-ʿAzīm*, 7:77.
[46] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 119.
[47] Mohamed Zakariya, 'Music for the Eyes: An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy', accessed 29 May 2013, http://www.zakariya.net/resources/music_for_the_eyes.html.

Now listen to this reed-flute's deep lament
About the heartache being apart has meant:
Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
My songs expressed each human's agony,
A breast which separation's split in two
Is what I seek, to share this pain with you:
When kept from their true origin, all yearn
For union on the day they can return.[48]

The reed empties itself and let the flowing spirit within it to produce melodies of sadness and longing for its lost origin. The dynamics between beauty, love, pain and longing – often grouped together in Sufism[49] – promise the return to the source of existence, as also proclaimed in the Quran 'Truly we are God's, and unto Him we return' (Q. 2:156). The connections between music and calligraphy resonated until nowadays, and it is not by chance that the contemporary calligrapher Hassan Massoudi, in *Calligraphie arabe vivante*, cited the following quote by the surrealist Louis Aragon: 'From the reed the musical line and the written line have emerged, the flute and the pen.'[50] In some conversations with calligraphers, especially from Konya, it emerged that the unambiguous scratching sound produced by the pen while writing, is, for them, the sound of remembrance (*zikir*), the lamenting sound and the prayer of the pen recalling its origins.[51] In similar manners, mystical poetry compared the scratching of the pen not only to lamentation and supplication, but also to the regenerative trumpet sound of the angel Isrāfīl during the Resurrection.[52]

An interesting practice still alive nowadays and reported to me by different calligraphers, connects spirituality, death and the pen in the Turkish tradition. From the Ottoman times until nowadays some novice calligraphers used and use to bury

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[48] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi, Book One*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[49] See, for instance, Suhrawardī, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi*, trans. W. M. Thackston (London: The Octagon Press, 1982), 62–75.
[50] Massoudy, *Calligraphie*, 18.
[51] For instance: 'While writing the *Basmala* on paper, the sound that the pen makes is like the sound of *zikir*. Calligraphy can be considered as prayer, a praise to Allah and a way of training the soul.' Öksüz I, 36:25.
[52] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 121.

their pens for around one week in the soil close to the graveyard of Şeyh Hamdullah, where he was buried in 1520 in the Karacaahmed cemetery in Üsküdar, an area located in the oriental side of Istanbul.[53] The general belief behind this practice revolves around the idea that the spiritual power and blessing (*baraka*) possessed by the master and founder of Ottoman calligraphy would flow in the pens and would bless and help the new students in the practice of their art. Hüseyin Kutlu confirmed the burial practice, granting to it new insights. In his interpretation the meaning behind it would not only be focused on the *baraka* flowing in the pens, but on allowing the souls of his students to find themselves, in some ways, in a state of contact, communication and connection with the spirit (*ruh*) of the Ottoman master calligrapher:

> I send my students to the grave of Şeyh Hamdullah, the *pir* of Turkish calligraphers, and I order them to put their *kalem* in the ground of the tomb. Then, I ask them to close the eyes and open the heart, so that they may feel the spirit of the master. The body is the cloth of your soul. Dying is basically taking your clothes off and hanging them on. The soul (*ruh*) does not die, it just removes its clothes. It still lives in a different dimension. Similarly to the waves of radios and televisions, invisible things are going on around us, we do not see them, but we know that they exist. We know that these feelings exist. So, the grave and all of this is basically a metaphor. The grave is just a stone. And digging the pen in the ground is just a metaphor. Usually it would not mean anything, but these stones and pens are curtains that prevent you to really see, to deeply understand, therefore most people would go to graveyards and would make some prayers without actually perceiving the soul. We want to make students understand that neither the pen, neither sheet, neither paper, neither a graveyard is calligraphy. This is very hard to explain, bear with me. The reason why I send students to Şeyh Hamdullah's grave is that I want them to find a way to communicate with Şeyh Hamdullah, to find a way that goes from their hearts and souls to Şeyh Hamdullah's soul. The students of calligraphy who do not grasp this point, they will be only workers in the art of calligraphy. They do not see the origin of the art, they are just like mineworkers, digging and digging. If heart and soul are

[53] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 48.

> missing, then even if you have a great mind, and eyes and hand to write, this will not constitute the art.[54]

Kutlu stressed the importance of opening the spiritual perceptive apparatus, in order to confer to the art of calligraphy its real dimension and aim, as distinguished to the mere technical and artistic ones, which, in his opinion, do not constitute the true dimensions of calligraphy, but only the superficial and more apparent ones.

The practice of visiting cemeteries is not only connected to immerging the pen into the ground of Şeyh Hamdullah's grave. Calligraphers visit graveyards and lead their students to their visit, with the aims of paying respect to the departed souls and to being immersed in, and to learn from, the calligraphic inscriptions on the tomb stones, as Kazan attested.[55] Syed affirmed to me that her master Kılıç taught her this practice, which she continues to carry out, now that she is a master, with her students.[56]

Another practice relating the pen to the dimension of death is the collection and the stocking of the chips made when calligraphers cut the nibs of their pens. Those chips are themselves considered to be sacred, being originated from a sacred tool, which is the pen. Those chips, once collected, are kept until the death of the calligrapher, and will be used to warm up through fire the water that will wash their dead bodies.[57] Several calligraphers told me about this collection and Hüseyin Kutlu personally showed to me, with great respect and reverence, the glass bowl where the chips of his pens have been gathered.[58] He told me that when the pot is full, they transfer the chips in a bigger vase where all the chips have been collected during all of his life, and then they start collecting those pieces again. It is interesting to note the connections between the symbology of the pen and the purifying role played by

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[54] Kutlu 24:01.
[55] David Simonowitz, 'A Modern Master of Islamic Calligraphy and Her Peers', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (2010): 84.
[56] Syed 10:48.
[57] Mansour, *Sacred Script*, 149.
[58] 'Once we cut the nib with the knife we do not throw away the chips of the pen, because we see the pen as sacred. When we will die someone will burn these chips to warm up the water to be used to wash our dead body. A person who does not know this and does not possess a subtle soul to understand this, would perceive the pen like a normal thing.' Kutlu 01:10:56.

the fire, which destroys the chips and create the energy to heat up the water used to purify the body for the last time in life. Thus, the pen, which in some interpretations mentioned before is connected to the pre-existential Light, becomes that physical light, or fire, that burns for granting to the calligrapher his or her ultimate purification. It has to be mentioned, though, that this practice is not followed today by every calligrapher anymore. Syed mentioned that she has been taught to collect the pen's shavings by her master Kılıç, a practice that she is teaching to her students as well.[59]

The practices related to death, such as immerging the pen into the ground of Şeyh Hamdullah's grave, visiting cemeteries, collecting the pen's shavings that will be used for the funerary rituals, remind of the Heideggerian philosophical notion of *Being-toward-death*, an authentic existential awareness of the finitude of being, without rejecting or suppressing its possibility.[60] The calligraphers involved with those practices are constantly aware of their ultimate destination. Nevertheless, the awareness of death is seen not as an end, but as a beginning, since they understand transience under the light of eternity.

2.2 The Ink

In this section some technicalities about the use and the preparation of the ink (*mürekkep*) will be discussed, together with some spiritual elements linked to this essential calligraphic tool.

In the history of Islamic calligraphy numerous and complex recipes have been recorded and used for ink preparation, the importance of which has been considered to be vital in the success of the art.[61] The colour of the ink, requiring different ingredients and processes in order to be created, has been usually

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[59] 'There is something special about the tools. Something that Efdaluddin *hoca* taught me very early on, is to never throw away the pen's shavings. I do not know if he collects them himself, but I have been always collecting my pen shavings. And I teach everybody to do that as well. The tools are elements of the Sacred, in terms of history, lineage, and because of their purpose and what they represent. The pen is a symbol of knowledge and respect for it.' Syed 44:02.

[60] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 247–55.

[61] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 60–61; Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 111–16.

lampblack. The use of golden scripts, though, is attested in the whole range of the history of Islamic calligraphy, from early nine-century Qurans written in golden Kufic[62] to nineteenth-century Ottoman calligraphic panels written in a lavish golden *celi sülüs*[63]. The ink could be sometimes of different colours too, used for writing the script and for illumination (*tezhip*) as well. Natural pigments have been used for the creation of coloured ink, such as crashed cochineals or vermillion for red, azurite or lapis lazuli for blue, and verdigris for green.[64] In the Ottoman calligraphic tradition and in the contemporary Turkish tradition as well, the most common type of ink to be used is the lampblack one, obtained by burning deep black substances such as linseed oil, beeswax, naphtha, or kerosene. The most used and developed formula requires to amalgamate soot, dissolved gum Arabic and water. The preparation of the ink (*mürekkep*) may take a lot of time, since several hours are required for mixing and grinding the ingredients all together; the final outcome is a deep black ink which may never fade. It was not unusual during the Ottoman times that the calligrapher did prepare his or her own ink, while today, even though calligraphers are aware of the preparation process and may prepare their own ink sometimes, usually they buy already made inks, of different qualities and origins. Iranian ink is considered to be one of the best inks, as its usage has been suggested to me by numerous calligraphers. The deep black liquid substance, usually contained and purchasable in plastic small bottles, is subsequently poured slowly, with caution and control, into a small inkpot usually made of glass, and filled with a bulk of silk filaments, as it possible to see in figure 2.8, a picture taken at one of the calligraphy shops at the already mentioned İstanbul Sahaflar Çarşısı.

[62] Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*, I:90–95.
[63] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 98–99, 142–49; Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 276–78, 281–88, 290–91.
[64] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 63.

Figure 2.8 *Inkpot filled with silk fibre. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

The calligrapher lets the bulk absorb the ink naturally, without excessively submerging the silk in the black liquid. Three reasons are behind the use of the bulk of silk: (i) granting that only the right amount of ink is collected by the pen; (ii) preventing any damage for the nib of the pen; (iii) preventing that the ink may be spilled out during transportation. If the nib was directly immersed in the ink, the script would happen to be irregular and unbalanced, showing excessive ink in some areas of the writing trait, and it would also become highly possible to pollute and ruin the precious paper that has been purchased or prepared in advance for the calligraphic piece. Thus, the pen has to be plunged into the ink pot very often, but thanks to the silk filaments, it collects the right and exact amount of ink, preventing the sprinkling of the black substance in excess. In figure 2.9 all the aforementioned tools, purchased at Ayten Tiryaki's shop, can be seen.

Figure 2.9 *Ink and inkpots: on the left a bottle of Iranian ink, on the right an empty inkpot made of glass, and in the middle an inkpot, ready to be used, containing silk filaments that have already absorbed the black ink. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Water can be added from time to time to the ink, in very small quantities, with the aim of 'giving life again' to a hardened ink, or of diluting it in order to confer a brighter and lighter quality to the script. In the Turkish calligraphic tradition, a deep black trait is usually used. However, the use of diluted and transparent colours has become a particular feature of the calligraphy of Mehmed Özçay, who – faithful to the Ottoman tradition in all the other aspects of the art – uses acrylic and transparent colours in some of his compositions. In figure 2.10 Özçay wrote the letter *wāw* with a light and transparent acrylic red ink, which interestingly displays each and every one of the slow, precise and mindful movements of the calligraphic trait, as well as the inclination of the nib of the pen and the overlaps of the trait, which are all features not visible whenever a deep black ink has been used.[65]

[65] 'I tried this style for the first time. Usually in the tradition black ink is used for the *wāw*, but I was the first one trying it in different colours, with a transparent ink and using the *celi sülüs* style. Usually the transparent ink is used in Quranic manuscripts for writing the *hareket*. After I invented this technique, it became very famous, and now it is used frequently in the world.' Özcay 58:11.

Figure 2.10 *Mehmed Özçay: wāw, Turkey, 2006, 19 x 20 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

As far as the spiritual elements related to the ink are concerned, the Quran refers to the ink in two different – yet similar – poetic and metaphorical verses, both alluding to the inexhaustible, unfathomable, infinite, unbounded nature of the Divine Word, and to the knowledge, power and wisdom of God as well: 'Say, "If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it."' (Q. 18:109). Furthermore, another verse proclaims the following words: 'And if all the trees on earth were pens, and if the sea and seven more added to it [were ink], the Words of God would not be exhausted. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.' (Q. 31:27). The commentators focused their attention on the inexhaustibility of the words of God, in other words, His knowledge, revelation and creative power, rather than conferring any specific metaphysical status to the ink.[66] Thus, it is possible to interpret the ink as metaphorically alluding to knowledge. We find the abovementioned Quranic verses echoing in the mystical poetry of Rūmī as well, carrying the same understanding. In the Masnavi he refers to the ink with the following verses:

> There are no limits to the infinite,
> So how can one work out the mean of it
> When its extremities no man has known?

[66] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 761–62.

"*If all the seas were ink*" this truth has shown.
If all seas turn to ink, still they can't write
Enough for there to be an end in sight;
If all the forests turn to pens, still they
Can't lessen what God's speech has to convey.
The pens and ink will empty gradually;
His boundless speech, though, lasts eternally.[67]

In the contemporary tradition the awareness of the sacredness of the ink has emerged in some of the interviews, especially with Ayten Tiryaki, Hüseyin Kutlu, Savaş Çevik, and Efdaluddin Kılıç. The awareness is nonetheless less strong than in reference to the pen or the paper. Ink is becoming more and more just a tool within the contemporary tradition, and its spiritual symbology is becoming forgotten. This may happen because calligraphers are not so involved anymore in the process of preparation of the ink, and in conferring to it spiritual blessings, as attested in some cultural practices within the Ottoman tradition. Some of those practices, though, emerged from the interview I had with Kutlu, who he is still teaching them to his students nowadays. Kutlu, after discussing the sacredness of the pen, introduced the topic of the sacredness of the ink as well, together with other interesting cultural practices:

> The ink is also perceived as sacred. The ink is composed by natural elements, from trees, like Arabic gum and *is*, which is a smoked black element originated from burned wood, and obtained, for example, from scratching the sides of chimneys. The elements are then smashed together in a ball. Before having electricity, in most places – in mosques for example – you would burn oil to create light through the use of lamps and candles. In Süleymaniye mosque there is a room where they collected soot (*is*) during the Ottoman period. Once they burned the candles, they got the smoke, and this smoke is one of the raw materials of ink; therefore, they created in the mosque an air circulation leading the smoke to a storing smoke room, so that

[67] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi, Book Two*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 208.

> they could collect this material with the specific intention of creating the ink, infused with the prayers recited in the mosque.[68]

From Kutlu's words we can recognise some of the technical features about the component elements of the ink already exposed at the beginning of this section. One of the interesting spiritual elements connected to the ink is the collection of soot from the Süleymaniye mosque during the Ottoman times, which has been reported by scholars and historians.[69] The greatest Ottoman architect, Mimar Sinan (1489–1588), predisposed a special circulation in the mosque leading the air into a room, with the specific purpose of collecting soot for the creation of the ink for calligraphers, and with a secondary purpose of not ruining and blackening the walls of the mosque by the numerous candles burning on the chandeliers. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the idea behind cultural practices related to the spiritual dimension of the ink, is to impregnate the ink with spiritual blessing. It is not hard to understand the significance of collecting a substance believed to be imbued with the spiritual power and blessings of prayer – a substance which was burning in the multiple fires which confer light to a mosque. In addition to its origins, also the final purpose of the ink is considered to be noble and of high spiritual value: the Ottoman sultans specifically purposed that that ink would have been used by patronised calligraphers in writing the holy verses of the Quran. Kutlu referred to me, though, that the collection of soot was not only happening at the Süleymaniye mosque, but in other religious spaces as well:

> In other places – like in other mosques, or *tekke*s, or *medrese*s – where they were burning candles to have light, they put a special stone right on the top of the candle, from which they would collect the soot. After that, they would put the soot and Arabic gum in a very heavy iron bowl, and then they would smash them and add water. Imagine that this is a really tough job to do, because smashing these two materials is really hard.[70]

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[68] Kutlu 01:09:38.
[69] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 40; Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 113.
[70] Kutlu 01:22:20.

Kutlu afterwards mentioned that today a calligrapher may still execute that procedure, or someone else may do that for him. The practice of smashing the raw materials used to create the ink is not very frequent today anymore, nevertheless Kutlu still teaches the process to his students, together with its spirituality. The meaning behind the procedure alludes to the idea of infusing in the ink the spiritual blessings which emerge from raising prayers to the Divine:

> The ink is usually prepared by the 'ink-man', but we request students to create their own ink as well. *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! We want to make students understand a deeper meaning behind the creation of the ink. Every time they smash the materials, they also perform *zikir*, the remembrance of Allah. *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! *Ḥayy*! And the spirit of the Living, and the loving emotions related to reciting His name, are all infused into the ink, which will be used to write the words of the Holy Quran. We also add water smashing the materials, and we put the substance in a special jar. In the past, going to Mecca was possible by camel, and they would put this jar with camel's caravan, which would mix and shake the substance during the journey to Mecca. The more you shake, the better the ink.[71]

In two instances, while stating those words, Kutlu started to mimic the action of smashing the materials into a jar while he was performing and chanting, in a rhythmic orgasmic way, the remembrance of God through one of His ninety-nine Divine Names: *al-ḥayy*, the Living (Q. 2:255; 3:2; 20:111; 25:58; 40:65). In particular, the verse 2:255 (*Allāhu lā ilāha illā huwa al-ḥayy al-qayyūm*; God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting), which mentions the Living, is often used as a form of prayer and remembrance in Sufi practices. The second time Kutlu imitated the smashing process, he emphasised the letter "*ḥ*" and the rhythm even more, punching his open left hand with the right one, and giving the impression that that name could confer life and spirit. As he mentioned, the intention behind that process is to transfer the love for the Creator to matter, as if the name of the Living could confer life to the ink. Artistically and metaphorically speaking, the black substance could be considered indeed as the life-giving blood which flows in the

[71] Kutlu 01:23:43.

pages of calligraphic pieces. The journey of the ink to the Mecca by camel performed during Ottoman times would confer in a similar manner an additional immersion in the Sacred. When I asked to Kutlu if that was still happening nowadays, he replied that that practice discontinued:

> No, this is not happening anymore, today we have planes. The ink was going to Mecca not for commercial purposes, but it was going there to become holy and come back. And through this process calligraphers could have also a better ink. Now, imagine the feelings of a calligrapher who knows that the ink is holy and who perceives the pen, paper and writing as holy as well, and then you will be able to understand what the art of calligraphy is.[72]

Efdaluddin Kılıç reported to me, in private conversations, that several Ottoman sultans – who were patrons of calligraphy – were sending ink and pens with caravans to the Mecca. As the words of Kutlu convey, the aim of that practice was to immerse the calligraphic material tools in the atmosphere of what is considered to be by Muslims as the most sacred place on earth, in order to perform a sacred art with sanctified material tools.

Finally, the ink may also be connected to the quality of control, which will be further elaborated in chapter four. On this regard Kurlu affirmed: 'Control is like predicting how far you can go. In the art of calligraphy, when you get the ink and you start writing, you have to calculate how far you can write.'[73] As mentioned before, the calligrapher needs to continuously immerge the pen in the ink pot, selecting the right amount of ink during the immersion process. The quality of control is also connected to the capability of keeping the calligraphic trait straight and uniform, and sometimes morbidly bended, controlling the breathing process too, which may otherwise alter the trait itself presenting irregularities and bumps in its flow. Control also implies the capacity to keep the page clean from dirt, and from any possible spillage of ink and colours which would otherwise spoil and ruin the artistic piece.

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[72] Kutlu 01:26:23.
[73] Kurlu 18:04.

2.3 The Paper

In this section I will highlight some technical aspects related to the paper and its usage within the art of penmanship, and some spiritual understanding revolving to the idea that the paper is a receptacle of writing, knowledge and sacred verses. The paper may also be metaphorically linked to destiny, in terms of being the receptacle of what the Divine Pen has decreed in the realm of Pre-Existence.

The importance, relevance and impact of paper in Islamic history cannot be underestimated, and serious academic studies have been carried out on this topic.[74] The Quran refers to paper as *qirṭās*, which identifies papyrus roll and parchment, rather than paper itself (see Q. 6:7 and 6:91). The production of paper in the Islamic world has been introduced in the Eighth century, after Muslim Abbasid forces defeated Chinese Tang forces in 751 at the battle of Talas. Chinese craftsmen were taken prisoner and transferred the knowledge of paper making in Samarkand.[75] Both papyrus and parchment continued to be used in the Islamic lands until the Tenth century, when paper eventually supplanted their usage.[76] In comparison to paper, papyrus was too fragile and expensive, while parchment was definitely a resistant and durable material, but it was also more expensive than paper. During the Abbasid rule the usage of paper satisfied the need of a more complex and frequent record keeping in the chancery, and it also allowed the production of a great number of books and translations from Greek thought, central for the dissemination, interpretation and expansion of knowledge, theology, philosophy and science. In chancery, the fact that paper absorbs the ink in its fibre, made alterations, forgery and falsifications of documents more difficult to accomplish.[77]

In the Ottoman and contemporary Turkish tradition, paper undergoes several processes, such as: (i) dyeing, often using black tea or other natural pigments, in order to confer a softer and more elegant colour; (ii) brightening and protection,

[74] See, for instance, Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).
[75] Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 50.
[76] Déroche, 26, 32–33.
[77] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 45.

through the application of a starch or egg-based substance called *ahar*; (iii) smoothing, through the use of burnishing tools made of wood or stone, such as agate or jade. In figure 2.11 Soraya Syed burnishes her paper.

Figure 2.11 *Soraya Syed demonstrating the burnishing process of paper. © www.artofthepen.com.*

Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır described several Ottoman recipes for the creation of *ahar*, today usually made out of boiling water, starch, fish glue and alum.[78] Substances such as musk or rose water may be added to the recipe with the aim of perfuming the paper.[79] *Ahar* grants brightness and protection from bugs, worms and aging, and its appliance confers several layers to the paper. The pen may easily flow on it, achieving the yearned 'breath-like flowing of the pen', as expressed by Ottoman calligraphers and reported by Mohamed Zakariya as well.[80] The added layers that separate ink from the surface of the paper guarantee that the ink will not be chaotically absorbed within the fibres of paper, but it would rather sit precisely where the calligrapher wants it to be. Consequently, in the case of mistakes committed by the calligrapher, the layers of *ahar* allow to simply swipe the ink away with some cotton, when the ink is still fresh, or to scratch those layers away with a

[78] Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1974, 2:198–201.
[79] Yazır, 2:200.
[80] Zakariya, 'Ahar Paper'.

small knife, which sometimes can be used also to perfect the edges of the letters while finalising the calligraphic piece. Every step of the paper preparation depicted so far requires a specific time, both for each and every moment of the process and in between those steps too. For instance, the paper should let be dried overnight and burnished no more than one week after being coated with *ahar* to avoid cracks; furthermore, it should be burnished for at least fifteen minutes of hard work; finally, after its burnishing, it should rest for at least one year before being used. A period from three to five years constitutes a good acceptable resting time, but the more the paper rests, the better. The whole preparation of paper constitutes thus a very long process, and calligraphers may want to carry it out by themselves, as stated by Mehmed Özçay[81], or may prefer to buy already prepared paper coated with *ahar*. Ayten Tirkyaki, together with her husband Özkan, prepares *ahar* every week in her atelier, using one hundred and fifty eggs. In figure 2.12 some of the eggs undergoing a process of filtering can be seen.

Figure 2.12 *Filtering white eggs for the ahar preparation at Ayten Tiryaki's atelier. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

[81] 'I buy and use acrylic ink, but we prepare *ahar* in our studio'. Özçay 01:13:32.

At Tirkyaki's shop calligraphers buy paper of different type, quality, provenience and colours (Figure 2.13). In the picture at the right the paper exhibits a special luminosity because it has been coated with *ahar*.

Figure 2.13 *Paper of different types and colours and paper coated with ahar at Ayten Tiryaki's atelier. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

In the Turkish tradition, the paper may be decorated with various forms, techniques and substances, such as golden leaves, gold-sprinkling colours, geometrical or floral decorations, rococo motives.[82] The geometrical patterns in particular may possess some philosophical, spiritual and cosmological interpretations.[83] A distinct art called *tezhip* is specifically focused on the illumination and beautification of paper, in the forms of albums, books and calligraphic panels, displaying in particular Quranic verses.[84] In most cases the calligrapher and the illuminator are two different persons working on the same artistic piece, but it is possible that the calligrapher studied illumination as well, as in the case of Ayten Tiryaki. In the contemporary tradition it is possible to notice that the majority of illuminators are female. Another art devoted to the beautification of paper and very significant both in the Ottoman and in the contemporary traditions is

[82] Zeren Tanındı, 'The Art of Illumination in the Ottomans', in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation*, ed. Kemal Çiçek, vol. 4 (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, 2000), 669–75.
[83] Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983).
[84] Lings, *Splendours*; Mohamed Zakariya, 'Islamic Calligraphy: A Technical Overview', in *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing*, ed. Carrol Garrett Fisher (East Lansing: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, 1991), 4–6; Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 225–51.

paper marbling, called *ebru*. This Turkish term comes from the Persian word *abrī*, meaning clouded. The technical process behind the marbling of paper originated in Central Asia and became prominently used in the Persian and Ottoman artistic traditions from the sixteenth century.[85] On a tank or basin full of water, usually of rectangular shape, floating substances like gum tragacanth and ox-gall are mixed with colours (frequently ochre, yellow, brown, red and violet) wisely sprinkled on water by the *ebru* artist with a rose paintbrush. The unique patterns are subsequently and carefully shaped through the use of a metallic stick, creating a marbling effect and mixing the colours together. Some images, usually flower-patterned, may also be created, and the work in that case constitutes an artistic piece on its own (Figure 2.14). The paper is then delicately placed on the water, where it floats for some seconds, while colours and patterns are transferred on it. The obtained marbled paper may be used as a background of a calligraphic work, or as a decorative frame.

Figure 2.14 *Fuat Başar: Marbled paper with tulip. © Fuat Başar.*

[85] Déroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 249.

In figure 2.15 a *basmala* in *ta'lîk* can be seen, written on a lightly marbled paper by Kemal Batanay (1893– 1981) and photographed by me in the studio of Ferhat Kurlu. Kemal Batanay was the teacher of *ta'lîk* of Hasan Çelebi, master of Kurlu. In Batanay's calligraphic piece, two layers of marbled paper can be seen. One constitutes the main body in yellow and light blue, around which another layer of blue marbled paper has been added. Finally, a final layer of illumination displaying floral imagery surrounds the work. As in the case of *tezhip*, some calligraphers practice both calligraphy and *ebru*, such as Fuat Başar, but usually those two arts are practiced by different artists to create a final work.

Figure 2.15 *Kemal Batanay: Basmala, Turkey, 1955-56. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

As far as the spiritual aspects are concerned, the paper is considered so important that some calligraphers prepare and store it for years, before using it for tasks that they consider of particular spiritual value. On this regard, Hilal Kazan testified: 'One of my personal aims is to write an entire Quran. I tried to write some entire short suras, but I have never written a complete Quran. My paper prepared with *ahar* has been stored for this purpose for a very long time. It is ready, and it is waiting for me to start. *Inshā'allāh*.'[86] It is clear that a relevant spiritual experience such as writing an entire Quran requires also the most suitable tools and materials.

[86] Kazan 10:52.

For that reason, some calligraphers store the paper for a long time, in order to improve its quality, and to use it for valuable purposes.

The perceived sacredness of the paper is directly connected to the fact that paper is a receptacle of writing, vehicle of sacred verses, and of knowledge and civilisation. In the first instance, writing signifies religious writing, and the verses of the Quran are considered the most holy entities of which the paper is a physical repository, transferring the sacredness of the words to the physical fibres of their receptacle. At the end of the interview I had with Ayten Tiryaki, she wanted to add some reflections that did not emerge during our conversation:

> I would like to add another closing point. Paper is sacred in calligraphy. Whenever I write something on a piece of paper, especially if it is something related to religion – it could be a tradition or a sacred verse – I do not throw away that piece of paper. If I need to deliver myself of it, I would just burn it. I think that while I am performing calligraphy I am also responsible for my religious beliefs and practices; therefore, I never dispose of a piece of paper, showing in that way disrespect towards holy writings. I know that I earn my life because of this art, and sometimes I write for selling purposes, but even then, I am aware that these are religious and sacred pieces, and calligraphers are responsible for their art, because those pieces link people to Allah and they contain His sacred words.[87]

From her words clearly emerges the awareness not only of the sacredness of paper, but also of the responsibility that a calligrapher has in showing respect towards an art that is centred on conveying a sacred message.

The paper has also been considered by other calligraphers as a receptacle of writing and as a source of knowledge and advancement of civilisation. Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır in his *Kalem güzeli*, presented a survey of different writing systems utilised all around the world, highlighting the relevance of those in literacy and culture.[88] This positive attitude towards writing echoed in the interactions I had with several calligraphers, especially those who considered *Kalem güzeli* as a formative

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[87] Tiryaki 54:24.
[88] Yazır, *Kalem güzeli*, 1972, 1:38–60.

reading, such as Fuat Başar, Mehmed Özçay and Savaş Çevik. The latter, mirroring some of the interpretations of Mahmud Bedreddin Yazır, reported that:

> In traditional Turkish culture a piece of paper or anything that has writing on it, it is considered to be sacred. Therefore, when people saw a piece of paper on the ground, they would pick it up. This refers to the holiness of writing. Paper is sacred too. People gave great value to paper, even to a tiny piece of paper, so that if they have it, they would not throw it away, before filling it fully. Paper is sacred because it means information, knowledge and culture. That is why it was considered to be so sacred, especially in ancient times. They have never used paper for bad purposes, they did not waste it and they did not use it in inappropriate situations. However, today in this modern world people are using paper all the time and for every purpose, like in the kitchen, in the toilet, even if there are other options available. Sometimes I do advise my students, after having dinner, not to clean the table with paper. Some students would ask, of course, 'why you care about paper so much?' Sometimes I do explain them that paper means trees and writing, so nature and culture. As a result, we can say that both paper and writing in calligraphy are sacred in this culture. When Allah swears by the pen and what people write, in the sura of the Pen, He does not talk about the Arabic script in specific, but about the sacredness of writing in general. All kind of scripts or words are sacred. Other alphabets and languages – Latin or Sanskrit or Chinese – are all sacred, because writing is sacred.[89]

Savaş Çevik's high respect and consideration of paper is very apparent in his words. Interestingly, he did not only perceive the paper as a receptacle of writing, but also as a token of nature, being made out of trees. As it is possible to gather, the paper is always considered to be relevant to human beings because it transmits both secular and sacred knowledge, and in this way, becomes a means to human development and civilisation. The following story reported to me by Fuat Başar about the calligrapher Mahmud Yazır Bedreddin, is a synthesis of the above considerations, and it stresses again the universal sacredness of writing:

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[89] Çevik 01:20:55.

In the Quran there is a verse referring to the people who are writing as sacred (*kutsal*). In Islamic civilisation both writing and the calligrapher are considered to be sacred. Interestingly, in the Chinese civilisation there is a very similar conception. The holiness of the scripts comes from the religious usage of those scripts in writing down religious texts. Religious texts are written. And science (*bilim*) is sacred too, just because writing is involved in it. Think about medicine, for example. In order to heal people, you need knowledge. How that knowledge had been transmitted? Through writing (*yazı*). In Islamic culture all types of scripts, including Chinese, Sanskrit, Cyrillic, Latin and all other writings, are perceived as sacred. There is no difference. I will tell you a story to demonstrate that. There was an old blind man named Hacı Kâmil Efendi[90]. When Hacı Kâmil Efendi was eighty years old, the calligrapher Mahmud Yazır was serving and helping him. Because that old man was blind, Mahmud Yazır would usually put a box right in front of the doorstep, where there was a dip, so that he would not stumble and fall, but he could walk on it instead. When Hacı Kâmil Efendi realised that there was something in front of the doorstep, he asked to Mahmud what it was. Mahmud said that it was a box that he put for him, in order not to fall. Hacı Kâmil Efendi asked if there was any writing on it. When Mahmud said that there were some writings in Bulgarian, Hacı Kâmil ordered him to take the box out of his way, as he perceived every kind of writing as sacred. Mahmud said that that writing belonged to the disbelievers (singular *gâvur*), but Hacı Kâmil replied that people can be Muslims or non-Muslims, but writings cannot. And then he continued: 'I did not do anything bad in this world, but disrespecting a writing, even if it is Bulgarian, would be enough to send me to hell'. Mahmud Yazır was the writer of the book *Kalem Güzeli* that made me become a calligrapher. And Hacı Kâmil Efendi rests there, close to my room. This event happened in the Nineteenth century. This is a story inside a story. His grave is right there.[91] Even if writing is perceived as something technical and material, behind it you can see many spiritual stories. We only spoke about one line, from a whole book.[92]

[90] Hacı Ahmed Kâmil Akdik (1861–1941), see chapter one, section two.
[91] He pointed to a resting place close to the mosque Küçük Ayasofya.
[92] Başar 01:47:33.

The sacredness of paper and writing as means to convey sacred and secular knowledge, clearly surfaced again from Fuat Başar's words. Interestingly, he also demonstrated the qualities of a talented story teller. His voice, his pauses, the speed and the intensity of his words, were all balanced and engaging. The combined and interconnected elements of contents, characters, and places, culminated and climaxed in the end, where he showed me the resting place of the old calligrapher Mahmud Yazır took care of. From this story and the account of his calligraphic journey which I have reported in chapter one, section three, the relevance of the tapestry of destiny emerged, introducing us to the last aspect connected to the sacredness of paper.

The paper is a symbol of Destiny. Philosophically and theologically speaking, the paper is conceived to be a receptacle, a Tablet, on which the Divine Pen writes the divine decree of Destiny in Pre-Existence.[93] The Quran mentions the concept of the Preserved Tablet (*al-Lauḥ al-Maḥfūẓ*) in Q. 85:21, a celestial tablet, from which the Quran has been taken, which contains the reality of all things, that is, the eternal archetypes created before creation.[94] All the mysteries and the knowledge of all things has been inscribed in that preserved Book.[95] Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), using a Neoplatonic terminology adopted by al-Fārābī (c. 872–c. 950), compared the Pen to the First Intellect and the Tablet to the Universal Soul.[96] On the Preserved Tablet, Savaş Çevik affirmed: 'We believe that everything that will happen in this world was pre-written in the book of Allah, in the Preserved Tablet, *al-Lauḥ al-Maḥfūẓ*. We are shaping now the things that were pre-written in that book, we are re-writing them in this world.'[97]

In conclusion, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 1272), in his commentary to the verse Q. 17:14 (Read your book! On this Day,[98] your soul suffices as a reckoner against you) in *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, connects the

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[93] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 18.
[94] David G. Alexander, 'The Guarded Tablet', *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 24 (1989): 204.
[95] 'And with Him are the keys of the Unseen. None knows them but He; and He knows what is on land and sea; no leaf falls but that He knows it, nor any seed in the dark recesses of the earth, nor anything moist or dry, but that it is in a clear Book.' Q. 6:59.
[96] A. E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muḥyid Dín-Ibnul 'Arabí* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 63, 132, 185.
[97] Çevik 01:34:23.
[98] The Day of Resurrection, mentioned in the preceding verse.

three calligraphic tools, pen, ink and paper, to the book of our beings and to symbols related to death and destiny: 'Your tongue is its pen, your saliva is its ink, and your limbs are the paper upon which it is written; it is you who dictates [it] to your own memory.'[99] These words imply that what we will remember at the moment of our death, are the words and the actions that will be written on the paper of our bodies during our lives, leaving space for human responsibility, freedom and auto-determination during the Day of Reckoning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this chapter it has been demonstrated how the material calligraphic tools may be considered as vehicles of the spirit, as tokens of an otherworldly reality, as symbols and reminders of our origin, destiny, responsibility, and death.

The pen possesses a rich symbology, encompassing the beginning and the end of all things. In the vast and complex Islamic and Turkish heritages the pen has been conceived as an entity created before creation, as Destiny or the instrument used by God to inscribe Destiny, as the Pre-Existential Light of God's First Intellect, as a photonic creative efflux emanated from the Infinite and writing on the tablet of existence all existent things. On the plane of human civilisation, the pen is perceived as the instrument of the propagation, nourishment and progress of culture and knowledge, a tool especially given from God to humankind for its learning and development and to be used as the essential tool in writing. In mysticism and poetry, it reminds love, longing and reunion; as songs of lamentation come out from the bamboo flute, prayers of remembrance cried out from the reed pen while scratching on paper. Finally, practices and beliefs related to the pen, such as collecting the pen's chips for kindling the fire that will warm up the water used to clean the corpse of the dead calligrapher, or such as plunging the pen in the ground of the cemetery of a great calligraphic master, they all remind of the final destiny of human beings, death, or the return to that state prior to creation, when destiny itself was created, and towards which – at the end of this ephemeral earthly season – we all return.

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[99] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 698–99.

The ink is a vital tool to the art of penmanship. I illustrated its constituent material elements, and some important religious references to it in the Quran and Turkish poetry, where the ink is portrayed as a symbol of knowledge, incomparable to the inexhaustible knowledge of God. During the Ottoman times, one of the constituent elements of the ink was collected in mosques and other religious places, the most important of which was the outstanding Süleymaniye mosque, and the ink was subsequently sent to the Mecca with the double aim of mixing its ingredients together and of being imbued by the sacredness of that place. Today an increasing number of calligraphers are not preparing their ink any longer, and purchase the substance in standard stationery shops. The practice of smashing the materials together, in order to create the ink while chanting one of the Names of God, the Living, it is still kept alive within the school of Hüseyin Kutlu, at least. This practice continues the trend from the Ottoman times regarding the idea of conferring blessings to the ink. Finally, some virtues have been briefly discussed in connection to the black substance, such as control, cleanliness, and tidiness.

The paper is a symbol of acceptance and receptivity. Its technical preparation is complex, and requires patience and maturation. It is considered to be sacred because it conveys writing, which can carry divine verses or secular knowledge, elements of development, civilisation and culture. Together with the Pen, paper assumes the significance of the Preserved Tablet, the receptacle where Destiny has been written in the realm of Pre-Existence. Again, a calligraphic symbol reminds human beings of their origins and final destination.

CHAPTER THREE

SPIRITUAL FORMS: THE POINT, THE LETTERS AND THE WORDS

In this chapter the analysis will move from the symbolism behind the material implements of the art of penmanship to the forms that the pen traces on paper: the dot, the letters and the words.

Once a student of calligraphy acquires all the tools necessary to perform the art, the calligraphic training can start. This takes place only under the guidance of a master, during one-to-one sessions, and usually once a week. Even in calligraphic schools, the master devotes some of his or her time to one student at a time. The training usually starts with writing a prayer, which will be analysed in the third section of this chapter. The time devoted to the prayer depends on the will of the master: in some cases, it involves several lessons, in other cases several years. After this first phase – during which no other instructions are given – the master teaches how to trace dots on paper, which constitute the elementary units of measurement of the calligraphic scripts. Subsequently, the student starts to learn how to trace letters, one by one, and subsequently in connection with all the other letters. Every week, the student brings his or her exercises to the master, who traces in red ink the correct proportions and measurements of letters, and the right movements of the calligraphic strokes. Every week the student works on these corrections, before moving on to a different lesson. When all the letters and the connections between the letters have been mastered, the student is ready to copy sentences from calligraphic albums given by the master to practice (*meşk*). At a higher level of proficiency, the student can start working on compositions.

The first section of this chapter will be centred on the first unit of measurement of the calligraphic art, that is, the point (*nokta*), and its spiritual symbolism. The second section will focus on the letters (*harfler*). A large amount of

literature has been produced on the topics of letter mysticism,[1] and on the use of the Arabic script in the construction of magical devices.[2] Through my research, I have found that there is a variance of positions on letter mysticism among calligraphers. These positions include: (i) engaging with some philosophical conceptualisations on letters, (ii) accepting partial aspects of those elaborations, and finally (iii) rejecting the metaphysical status attributed to letters. No calligrapher mentioned to have used Arabic letters in the construction of talismans or other magical devices. For this reason, I will not take into account this particular aspect. Finally, in the last section I will analyse how the calligraphic training involves different exercises, in which the student, copying his or her master, and an Ottoman calligraphic album, learns how to trace proportioned letters and how to connect together letters in sentences. The spirituality of the training will be shown in the use of a specific prayer.

3.1 The Point

The point (*nokta*) is the foremost element in calligraphic measurements. Ibn Muqla (d. 940) elaborated his system of proportioned script through which all the measurements of letters depend on the dot traced by the pen. In particular, according to different styles, a certain number of dots (having an angle of forty-five degrees),

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[1] Jean Canteins, *La voie des lettres, tradition cachée en Israel at en Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981); Annemarie Schimmel, 'The Primordial Dot', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 350–56; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 411–25; Jean Canteins, 'The Hidden Sciences in Islam', in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: SCM Press, 1991), 447–68; Abdelhamid Saleh Hamdan, 'Ghazali and the Science of Ḥurūf', *Oriente Moderno* 65, no. 10/12 (1985): 191–93; Denis Gril, 'The Science of Letters', in *The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, vol. 2 (New York: Pir Press, 2004), 105–220; Michael Ebstein and Sara Sviri, 'The So-Called Risālat Al-Ḥurūf (Epistle on Letters) Ascribed to Sahl Al-Tustarī and Letter Mysticism in Al-Andalus', *Journal Asiatique* 299, no. 1 (2011): 213–70; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, 'Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light', *Al-ʿUṣūr Al-Wusṭā* 24 (2016): 42–113.

[2] Francis Maddison and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Science, Tools & Magic*, vol. 1 (London: The Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1997); Francesca Leoni et al., *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2016); Venetia Porter, 'The Use of the Arabic Script in Magic', in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, ed. M.C.A. Macdonal, vol. 40 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010), 131–40; Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. 3, Bollingen Series 43 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 214–27; Angelo M. Piemontese, 'Aspetti Magici e Valori Funzionali Della Scrittura Araba', *La Ricerca Folklorica*, no. 5 (1982): 27–55.

vertically oriented, determine the letter *alif*. This letter determines the diameter of the circumference where all the other letters will be inscribed.[3]

A contemporary of Ibn Muqla, the mystic al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), elaborates on the concepts expressed above: 'the dot is the origin of every line, and the whole line is dots joined together. So, the line cannot do without dots and the dot without the line. Every straight or curved line emerges by moving out of that same dot.'[4] Projecting these notions on a metaphysical level, according to Ḥallāj the dot is a symbol of supreme synthesis of knowledge, and supreme synthesis of all things (*kullu shay'*).[5] In a similar way, the Mevlevi İsmail Rüsûhî Ankaravî (sixteenth century), *sheikh* of the Galata dervish lodge in Istanbul, wrote: 'The essence of Oneness (*vahdet-i ehâdiyyet*) is like a point from which, before the world and human beings, comes forth a line tracing a circle (*dâ'ire*). […] The world and the man come into existence like a manifestation of the point of the essence, and they walk around the circle of existence.'[6] All contingent existence can be brought back to its primordial origin, the dot traced by the Divine Pen, as demonstrated in chapter two, section one. All potentialities of manifestation are encapsulated in the dot. All letters, all words, all sentences, the infinite knowledge, are all expressions and manifestations of but one dot. The Divine creative power of the command (*amr*) of God, by saying '*kun!*' (Be!), it manifests the efficient cause, the Pen, which traces the dot, symbol of the state of unity (*waḥdat*) into which all the expressions and potentialities are condensed. These concepts find a visual representation in a work by Kılıç, penned in *celî sülüs* (Figure 3.1).

[3] Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 1:298–313; Schimmel, 'The Primordial Dot', 355.
[4] Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 1:128.
[5] Schimmel, 'The Primordial Dot', 355.
[6] Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)*, 52.

Figure 3.1 *Efdaluddin Kılıç: kun fayakūn, Turkey. © Enderun Sanat.*

In the calligraphic work above, the Quranic words *kun fayakūn*[7] (Be! And it is) are written within a forty-five degrees dot. In the piece it is possible to see a convergence of technical calligraphic aspects and metaphysics: the dot which is the primal element in calligraphy is equated with the primordial creative instance.

The dot as a symbol of universal encapsulated knowledge, is found in a well-known tradition attributed to ‘Alī by Sufis, which conveys the idea that all that is in the Torah, in the Evangel and in the Psalms, is in the Quran; and that all that is in the Quran, is in its opening sura; and that all that is in the opening sura, is in the *bismillāh*; and that all that is in the *bismillāh*, is in the letter *bā’*; and that all that is in the *bā’*, is in its point.[8] Finally ‘Alī identifies himself with the dot under the letter *bā’* (ب). The majority of Sufi schools sees ‘Alī at the top of the transmission of mystical knowledge, and for that reason perceives him as the encapsulation of all the religious knowledge of previous religions, of all the Quran, and of all of its letters, brought back to the point of the very first opening letter.

Another tradition attributed to Prophet Muhammad, depicts the point as a focus of all knowledge: ‘Knowledge is but one point, which the foolish have

[7] See Q. 3:47; 3:59; 19:35; 2:116-117; 6:73; 36:82; 16:40; 40:68.
[8] Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), 36; Schimmel, ‘The Primordial Dot’, 356.

multiplied' (*al-ʿilmu nuqtaṭun kaththarahā al-jāhilūn*).[9] Özkafa wrote this tradition within a golden calligraphic point, surrounded by other points (Figure 3.2).

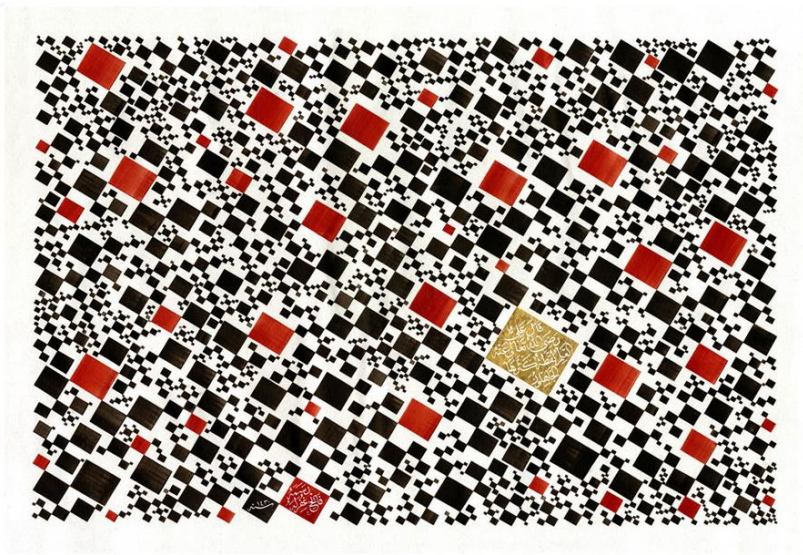

Figure 3.2 *Fatih Özkafa: al-ʿilmu nuqtaṭun kaththarahā al-jāhilūn, Turkey, 160 x 100 cm. © Fatih Özkafa*

The work by Özkafa reminds of one of the first calligraphic exercises taught by a master, when the student has to trace dots on a blank page of paper, filling all the space. The master subsequently circles in red ink the dots that he or she considers as acceptable, and which the student should strive to replicate during the practice.

As a summary of all the concepts expressed so far, Fuat Başar showcased the relevance of the dot from a technical point of view, but also providing his spiritual insights and interpretations:

> Spirituality is linked to the word *hat* (line). In other civilisations the art of writing is mentioned as calligraphy. In the Islamic civilisation this has been preceded by the science of drawing lines (*hattatlık*). In Islamic civilization the beginning is the dot (*nokta*). All the ratios and measurements of the letters are determined by the dot that is traced by the nib of the pen (*kalem*). With the movement of the pen from the point, you have the line. Moving the line in certain directions creates the letters. So, we

[9] Ismāʿīl ibn Muḥammad 'Ajlūnī, *Kashf Al-Khafā'* (Beyrut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1979), vols 2, 67.

> have the dot, then the line, finally the letters. If the dot does move, then there is not only one dimension, but two. Since the pen is angled, once you move the pen from the point, you have the upper-line and the under-line. This art is based on these two lines. If they are in harmony, then the outcome is artistic. In that harmony you need certain measurements. The ratio of the upper-line and under-line should be congruent with human body ratios and all other natural ratios of the world. What does it mean? Look at the world of nature, the beginning was the dot, and then it started to expand, and then you have all the other directions. That means that the dot started to move, and all the creative actions happened right after. After the movement of the dot.[10]

In Başar's words, it is possible to recognise the same concepts, merged together, expressed above by al-Ḥallāj and İsmail Rüsûhî Ankaravî. Thus, the dot is not only the primal form of the art of penmanship, but also a dynamic symbol of the beginning and expansion of the universe, and of all the proportions that govern all the natural things. In chapter seven I will expound on the concept of the relationship between the golden ratio and calligraphy, as emerged from Başar's views.

3.2 The Letters

The letters are forms that the calligrapher traces after he or she mastered the dot. In this section I will not focus on the educational training and on the practice of the art, aspects which will be analysed in the following section. I will rather purely devote my analysis to the exploration of the mystical interpretations of letters by my participants. A rich mystical and philosophical speculation on letters has been generated in Islam also because of the presence in the Quran, at the beginning of some suras, of disconnected letters (*ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿāt*). Considered as one of the mysteries of the Divine Book, commentators, philosophers and mystics elaborated the most different theories, trying to explain their existence.[11]

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[10] Başar 57:10.
[11] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 13–14.

On the topic of the spiritual symbolism of letters, I have detected a multiplicity of conflicting approaches and interpretations. Özkafa and Kutlu accept some philosophical conceptualisations on the mystical dimensions of letters; Kılıç, Kurlu, the Depeler brothers accept only partially those elaborations, and finally Özçay, Çevik and Çelebi reject the metaphysical status attributed to letters.

There is a general consensus on the sacredness of the script itself, for the reason that it has been adopted as a vehicle of the revelation of the Quran. Exemplifying this sentiment, Öksüz affirmed:

> After the Quran was revealed, Islam started to expand into other geographical regions, and non-Arabs became Muslims; their alphabets have also changed. Turks, for instance, replaced their *Göktürk* (Old Turkic) alphabet, with the Arabic alphabet. Other communities, such as Indians and Persians, also became Muslims and used the Arabic alphabet. So, the Arabic alphabet turned into an Islamic alphabet, a common alphabet for all the Muslims in the world. It should be considered as holy, since the Quran was written with those letters. That is why we tend to perceive the art of calligraphy as sacred (*kutsel*).[12]

If the Arabic script itself possesses an aura of sacredness because of its connection with its religious usage, among calligraphers it is debatable whether the letters possess spiritual or mystical meanings on their own.

According to Kutlu, multiple books could be written only on the mystical meanings of letters.[13] Kutlu regards Sufism as the main path through which calligraphy can be deeply understood and experienced.[14] For this reason, he believes

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[12] Öksüz II, 7:25.
[13] Kutlu 01:54:12.
[14] 'Studying calligraphy should be a journey through secret tunnels. These secret tunnels are of course Sufism (*tasavvuf*), because the art of calligraphy, as well as other arts, was maintained in *tekke*s. Why we do not see arts in a Muslim seminary (*medrese*)? Because at that time in seminaries you could only produce knowledge, so it was all about making your mind work. But in the *tekke* the interest was upon the soul, rather than upon the brain. You can say what you are thinking. But how can you express what you are feeling with your soul? You can only express your feelings from the heart through calligraphy, music and other arts which can allow you to express your soul, and not only your brain.' Kutlu 16:48.

that letters possess a mystical interpretation behind their forms. Özkafa shared the same view, and he detailed some of his interpretations on letter mysticism:

> There are meanings and philosophical conceptions behind the letters, especially *wāw* and *alif*. *Wāw* symbolises both God and man, representing their unity (*waḥdat*), according to *abjad* calculations. *Wāw*, in *abjad*, means six. *Wāw* and *wāw*, is sixty-six, which means Allah. Tulip (*lâle*) is also sixty-six. *Wāw* represents a baby in the womb of a mother. It also means oath in the Islamic culture. You know that in the Quran Allah swears by certain objects, such as sun, moon, day and night. *Wāw* symbolises all of these oaths. *Wāw* is also a symbol of all people. Adam is forty-five in *abjad* and Eve is fifteen. The total is sixty. If you add a *wāw*, the total is sixty-six, which is God. There are similar philosophical elaborations behind other letters too. And they are even more confusing. But you can find my article about *wāw*, of about twenty or thirty pages on my website. But you could write a book only about that. You should read Ibn 'Arabī's treatises.[15]

The Andalusian Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), has been an important figure in the development of Ottoman intellectual history, especially within the Sufi context.[16] His books were read and commented upon by Sufi masters, as by the Mevlevis of Istanbul.[17] According to Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy, the Divine Breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-raḥmān*), generates all the Divine Names, symbolised by different letters, and connected to different metaphysical dimensions, different creatures or elements, and linked to different planets and signs of the zodiac.[18] The cycle of manifestation of the Merciful starts with the *alif* (symbol of beginning, oneness, the First Intellect, the Divine Pen) and ends with the *wāw* (symbol of reintegration and unity of all things).

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[15] Özkafa 22:40.
[16] Mustafa Tahrali, 'A General Outline of the Influence of Ibn 'Arabi on the Ottoman Era', The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, accessed 11 April 2017, http://www.ibnarabisociety.org.uk/articles/ottomanera.html.
[17] Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)*, 16, 47.
[18] Canteins, 'The Hidden Sciences in Islam', 458–60.

In calligraphy the letters *alif* and *wāw* have been often penned alone on a piece of paper, or painted on the walls of mosques. As a contemporary example, Özkafa wrote in *celî dîvânî* a calligraphic representation of an entire short sura of the Quran, the sura 112, within the shape of the letter *alif* (Figure 3.3).

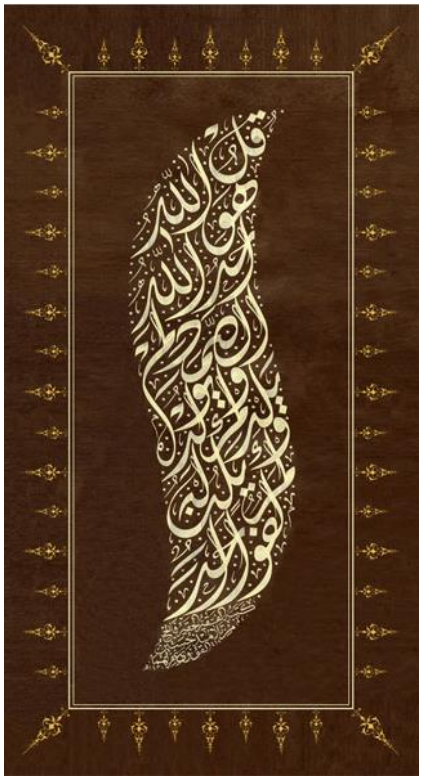

Figure 3.3 *Fatih Özkafa: Q. 112, Turkey. © Fatih Özkafa.*

The sura 112 is one among the shortest suras of the Quran: 'Say, "He, God, is One, God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not; nor was He begotten. And none is like unto Him."' As the sura is centred on the concept of the Absolute Oneness of God, the symbolism behind the *alif* revolves around the concepts of the Creator in His Unicity and Uniqueness.

During my interview with Kılıç, I mentioned to him some philosophical and Sufi conceptualisations on letters, referring these to hidden meanings, powers, psychological states, and cosmic metaphysical dimensions. I asked to him what his position in reference to these ideas was, and the following has been his answer:

> I cannot judge these ideas, because whoever expressed all these connections, between letters and cosmic dimensions – whatever – probably they felt something. I consider these things individual experiences. When they wrote a book, they wanted to share what they felt. In time it may become a kind of knowledge. But what is the source? What is the reliable source behind this? Other than their quotations and experiences? I do not reject all of this, it is nice to hear that every letter has an angel behind it – lots of these kind of things… So, these are nice stories, I do not want to blame anyone, but I sometimes feel like they are making things much holier than they are. If something is valuable, if something deserves to be respected – here you are – you do not need to add anything to that.[19]

Kılıç demonstrated a degree of scepticism on the mystical notions presented above, without rejecting them completely.

I asked to Kurlu whether he believes that the letters dwell somewhere in Heaven or in the Tablet of God. He replied to me that their shape does not exist somewhere, but their meanings abide in the Pre-Existential Tablet: 'The meaning of the divine verses is from Allah, the shape of the letters is from men. We are inspired by the art of Allah, then we created our own art.'[20]

The Depeler brothers are aware that letters have their own spiritual meanings. They do not entirely reject these meanings, but they conceive the letters as aesthetical forms, rather than metaphysical realities:

> Some consider the *wāw* as a baby in a mother's womb. It is also said that *alif* symbolises the *lafzatullah* (the name of Allah). These two letters are considered as quite significant in calligraphy, as they symbolise certain spiritual things, and they are meaningful especially when they are alone. You can find them frequently in calligraphy and in mosques, because the letters are so aesthetically beautiful on their own.[21]

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[19] Kılıç 52:58.
[20] Kurlu 01:13:09.
[21] Depeler brothers 33:40.

According to Özçay, the letters possess a spirituality in reference to their connection to the Quran, and because of their shape, rather than their symbolic meaning:

> In the art of calligraphy, you do not find shapes that are angled, its aesthetics is organic and rounded. The writing of the Quran was affected by the spirituality of the religion; therefore, we have these organic shapes. The art of calligraphy was developed just because there was the need to write down the Quran in a respectable, clear and refined way.[22]

Furthermore, Özçay recognises the historical existence of mystical interpretations behind letters developed during the intellectual history of Islamic calligraphy, but he does not embrace those interpretations, even if he believes that letters possess an aura of sacredness:

> I do not personally think that letters are mystical symbols, but of course during history some letters like *alif*, and *wāw*, became symbols, and people attributed some meanings to them. For example, *alif* symbolises *tawḥīd*, the Oneness and Uniqueness of Allah. It is debatable whether letters possessed meanings from the beginning, or whether they do not have a meaning, and people, later only, have attributed meanings to them. I think that there is no need to attribute special meanings and mystical values to specific letters, because all letters are already holy in themselves, and the sentences and verses from the Quran have already a meaning. Therefore, there is no need to divide sentences, letter by letter, and to try to seek secret meanings in those pieces. Traditionally, though, there are some letters that acquired a symbolic status and value. For example, there is a scholar named İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu who thought that Arabic letters could have the same shape of the human body, in different positions. But I think this is debatable, and I do not agree with that. Calligraphers when create letters while performing their arts, they do not try to make them similar to the shape of a human body.[23]

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[22] Özçay 29:37.
[23] Özçay 36:06.

Arabic letters have been considered sacred, and have been compared to bodily features, from the early centuries, close to the inception of the art of penmanship.[24] Some mystical movements, such as the one of the Ḥurūfīs, conceived the positions of the body during the performance of the obligatory prayer, as the letters that combined together make the name of Allah.[25] The Ḥurūfiyya Sufi school, founded by the Persian Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (1339–1394), was a mystical movement whose doctrine was entirely concentrated on the conceptualisation of the cosmos as made out of letters.[26] The movement was influent in Turkey, especially within the Bektashi and Qizilbash milieus.[27] It is not surprising that the Bektashis have elaborated a system deeply involved with letter mysticism.[28] Within the Turkish contemporary thought, this trend continued, as it can be seen in the ideas of İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu.[29] However, his position has not been generally accepted by calligraphers, as Özçay affirmed.

Since Özçay portrayed in numerous pieces the letter *wāw* alone, I asked to him if he believes it to be a symbol of the unity of Existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). He replied to me that he wrote the *wāw* several times, but not with the belief that it possesses an important or hidden meaning.[30] He added: 'I wrote it because of its shape and its aesthetical beauty; its beauty is so impressive and organic. It speaks to you like a human being.'[31]

Similarly, Çevik does not believe in the mysticism of letters, and he conceives these only as tools to convey a meaning, where the true spirituality abides. Letters do not pre-exist, and the only important aspect related to a script consists in its capacity to transmit knowledge and civilisation:

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[24] Franz Rosenthal, 'Significant Uses of Arabic Writing', *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 19.
[25] Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 56–57.
[26] Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power: Ḥurūfī Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 45–94.
[27] Mir-Kasimov, 22.
[28] John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac & Co, 1937), 94.
[29] Ismayıl Hakkı Baltacioğlu, *Türklerde yazı sanatı: türksanat yazılarının grafolojisi ve estetigiüzerine sosyo-psikologik deneme* (Ankara: Mars T. ve S.A.S. Matbaası, 1958), 90–92.
[30] Özçay 37:49.
[31] Özçay 40:20.

> Do not take the Arabic alphabet so seriously, because it could have been another alphabet. Every script is important, and a source of culture and learning. I do not give value to the letters in themselves. These are just tools. Most of the shapes of the Arabic letters were created later in time. Before, the Arabic script was mostly primitive, some strokes were like simple lines, similarly to Greek, and then they evolved. There are two crucial points related to writing: first is the meaning of a text, and in the sight of Allah this is the most important point; secondly, there is the process of turning those meanings into art, which is what we are doing. Art is very much integrated with the form. But in the second part, where we are involved, meaning has to be there as well.[32]

Also Çelebi rejected the idea of letter mysticism, presenting the most sceptical point of view. According to him, letters are only letters, and they do not carry any other hidden meaning:

> Letters are letters, only when they are gathered together they construct a meaning. According to the *abjad* calculation there is a numerical value behind letters, but I do not believe in Ḥurūfism. Other than the numerical value of letters, if you seek for a spiritual meaning behind letters, that is Ḥurūfism and I do not believe in that. For example, there is a University Professor, I prefer not to say his name, who interprets the letter *fā'* as a person who is laying down. For me this is meaningless. Or he perceives the letter *wāw* as the womb of a mother, but that is meaningless too.[33]

Çelebi accepts the *abjad* system of letter calculation, which connects every letter to a numerical value, but he rejects any other interpretation. In reference to the ideas of İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, I clarified with Çelebi that my interest was more in knowing if he accepted mystical interpretations, rather than visual interpretations of letters. He replied that 'Maybe a new branch of knowledge, or a new science will be developed in this field, but the calligraphers will not be those who will develop it, and they are not those who know these meanings.'[34]

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[32] Çevik 01:34:23.
[33] Çelebi 54:46.
[34] Çelebi 58:03.

Concerning the *abjad*, Çelebi told me that he knows how to calculate the numerical value of letters and sentences, but that is not what he does for his works. He added that the calligraphic inscriptions in monuments in Istanbul, carry cyphered numerical messages behind their letters:

> There is a fountain close to the mosque Mihrimah Sultan in Üsküdar, with the inscription '*iç suyu çeşme(y) sultanahmetten*' (drink water from Sultanahmet). This line actually refers in *abjad* to the year of the foundation of the fountain. If you calculate the numerical value of every letter, you will know at the end the date of construction. Sometimes in Anatolian cities you may see the letter *wāw* on the walls of mosques. The reason behind that *wāw* is not spiritual, it is a reference to the fact that the place is a *waqf*, a pious foundation and it should be respected by other people.[35]

Academic literature reported the custom in Ottoman architecture to play with chronograms in the calligraphic inscriptions on several types of buildings.[36]

It is interesting to note how different the views on the meaning of the letter *wāw* are. For instance, Özkafa referred to the doctrine of the unity of existence, and Çelebi to a mark of a religious foundation. It is not my goal to solve the tension between these different positions, but only to display the existence of these divergent points of view.

3.3 Words into Art and Calligraphic Compositions

In this section I will illustrate the practice of calligraphic exercise (*meşk*). I will first showcase how the practice starts with writing a specific prayer, then it moves to the construction of letters, on their own, and later in connection with other letters. Once all the connections between all letters have been mastered, a calligrapher moves to the stage of copying full sentences. Only at the end, a calligrapher is ready to create

[35] Çelebi 59:06.
[36] See, for instance, M. Uğur Derman, 'Yesârîzâde Mustafa İzzet Efendi and His Contributions to Ottoman Architectural Calligraphy', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 326.

compositions. As Kurlu affirmed, 'this art possesses something really deep like eternity, but on the other hand it has something technical too. You can create something new, but you have to abide to calligraphic rules in creating letters and compositions.'[37] This section will explore the necessary rules to be mastered in the study and in the practice of the art.

3.3.1 Calligraphic Exercises

The calligraphic practice (*meşk*) is constituted by different exercises, which mainly entail to copy the writing of a living master or of an Ottoman calligraphic exercise album (*meşk murakkası*) of the specific style studied by the aspirant calligrapher. Usually once a week, the student brings his or her exercises to the master, who traces in red ink the correct proportions and measurements of letters, together with the right movements of the calligraphic strokes. Figure 3.4 illustrates an example of a practice sheet of Nassar Mansour, with corrections traced in red by his master Hasan Çelebi.[38]

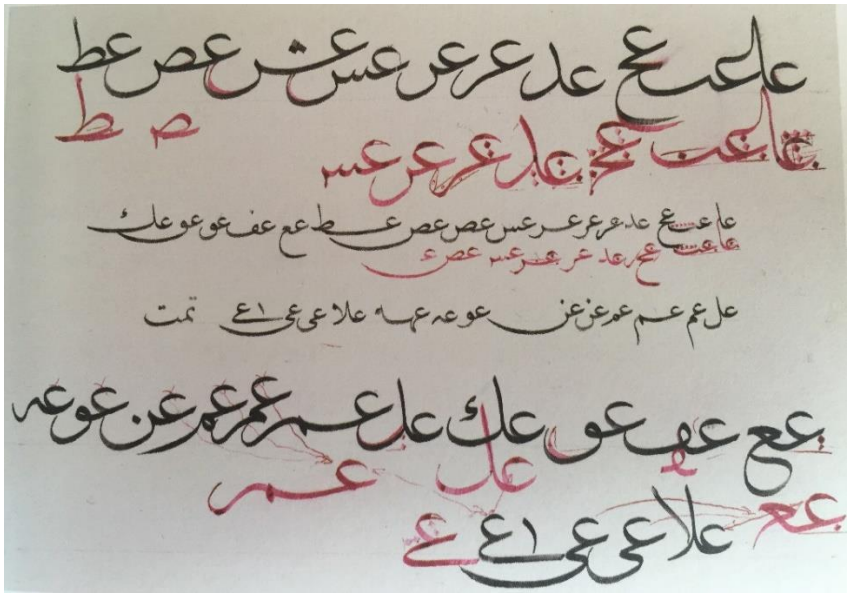

Figure 3. 4 *Example of a practice sheet. After British Museum, Making of the Master, 2.*

[37] Kurlu 15:22.
[38] See British Museum, *Making of the Master: The Art of Arabic Calligraphy* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 2005).

The student has to work on the corrections and suggestions he or she has received from one lesson to the other, before moving on to a different stage of the calligraphic practice. The student's aim consists in exactly reproducing, with precision and patience, the letters' dynamism and proportions as shown by his or her master. When all the letters and the connections between the letters have been mastered, the student is ready to copy sentences from calligraphic albums given by the master to practice (*meşk*). Usually students start with the study of the calligraphic album in *sülüs* and *nesih* by Mehmed Şevki Efendi (1829–1887).[39] Students of *ta'lîk* copy the album by Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan (1869–1940).[40] 'Beginners start with *müfredat meşk*s, consisting of characters and syllables, followed by *mürekkebat meşk*s, which taught pupils about the arrangement of lines using selected texts.'[41] In figure 3.5, the first section (*kıt'a*) of the calligraphic album by Şevki Efendi can be seen.

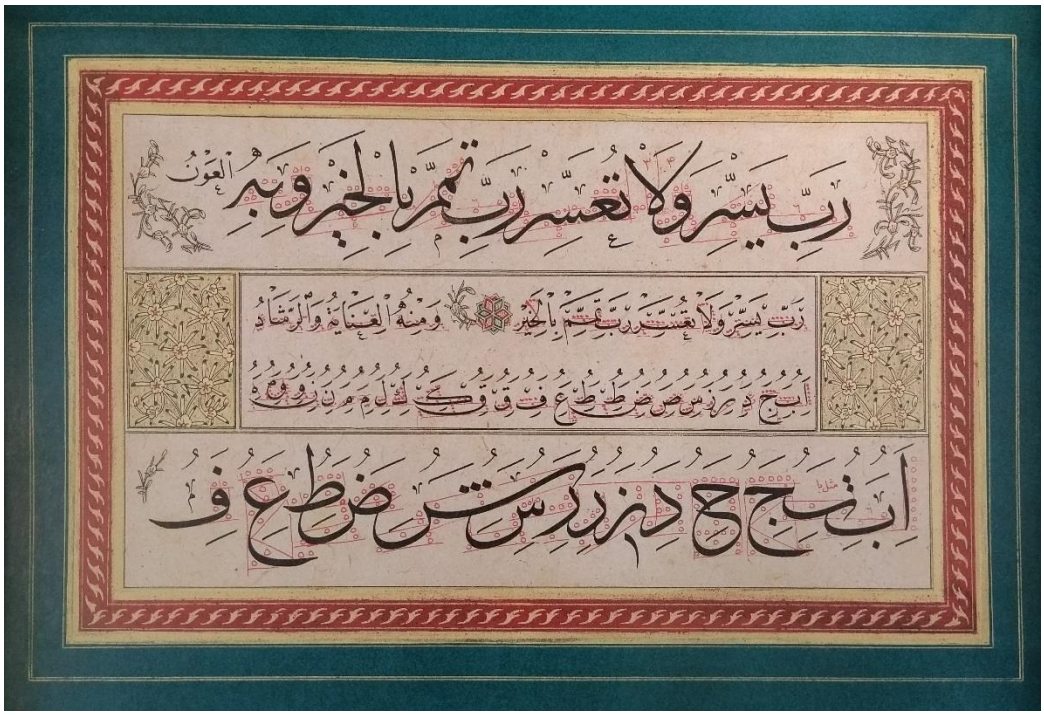

Figure 3.5 *Şevki Efendi: kıt'a. After Uğur Derman, ed., Şevki Efendi'nin sülüs-nesih hat meşkleri.*

[39] M. Uğur Derman, ed., *Şevki Efendi'nin Sülüs-Nesih Hat Meşkleri* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2010).
[40] Yazgan, *Hulûsî Efendi'nin ta'lîk meşk murakkaı*.
[41] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 51.

The *kıt'a* is composed by an upper line in *sülüs*, two central lines in *nesih*, and a final line in *sülüs* again. The dots penned in red ink show the correct letters' measurements, and thin red lines illustrate the structure behind the letters' constructions.

The album traditionally starts with a prayer called *Rabbi yessir* by Turkish calligraphers. The entire prayer is in Arabic, and it recites the following words: *Rabbi yassir wa lā tuʿassir, Rabbi tammim bi'l-khayr* (O my Lord, make things easy and do not make them difficult. O my Lord, let everything be brought to a propitious conclusion).[42] The prayer is inspired by some Quranic verses which possess a very similar wording (see Q. 20:25-27). Its meaning is obviously related to the desire of attracting divine blessings at the beginning of the challenging calligraphic path and practice. According to Kılıç, it is 'the beginning before the beginning', and traditionally the prayer should be copied for about forty lessons at least.[43] It is not uncommon that some students wrote the prayer for months or years, before moving to the second lesson. For instance, Hasan Çelebi stated that he wrote it for two years, before receiving his second lesson.[44] The master decides when it is time to progress in the training, from one step to the other. I will refer to this prayer in different contexts of the present work: in relation to the training of the physical aspects, to the development of patience, and to worship.

Hasan Çelebi summarises, according to his experience, the manifold facets related to the practice of writing *Rabbi yessir* and the letters:

> The art of calligraphy is a kind of work where the calligrapher develops his mastery through practice. But it is also a way to educate the soul. You begin with a prayer to God and start to work on '*Rabbi yessir*…' Then you write the letters, one by one, thousands of times, so that each one of them gets stamped in your mind and your hand with its most sensitive and elegant measure. There is no other explanation. The apprentice, whose soul and hand have had the necessary training, is then ripe enough to receive authorization. He is at the threshold of a new door through which he will

[42] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 126; Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 51.
[43] Kılıç 30:03.
[44] Derman et al., *Hattin Çelebisi*, 4.

pass, and he will start producing work that will pierce the heart and kindle the soul of the others.[45]

A calligraphic study of the prayer in *sülüs-nesih* by Özçay, shows all the measurements and the hidden structure behind the construction of words and sentences (Figure 3.6). Commenting this work to me, he said: 'I wanted to transfer the measurements of the study of calligraphy into a *levha* (calligraphic panel). People loved it. So, I did not get rid of those measurements, they are there on purpose.'[46]

Figure 3. 6 *Mehmed Özçay: Rabbi yessir, Istanbul, 1999, 9.5 x 36.5 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

After the study of the prayer, and after learning how to trace separated letters, the lessons move on how to connect all the letters together, studying different types of possible connections. At the end of each line of the calligraphic albums, especially in *ta'lîk*, there is a stylised sketch of the word *sa'y* (persevere).

The last step consists in the *mürekkebat meşk*s, through which the student copies lines from traditions, prayers, poems in honour of Prophet Muhammad, and Quranic verses, sometimes without the aid of measurements and the structural lines.[47]

3.3.2 Karalama

Karalama is a specific calligraphic practice and exercise through which the calligrapher uses all the space available on paper, making it black (*kara*). However, it

[45] Derman et al., 13.
[46] Özçay 01:13:32.
[47] See, for instance, Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 150–51, 154–55.

became a genre on its own, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in Iran, as attested by Roxburgh.[48] According to Ekhtiar, the Persian calligrapher ʿImād al-Ḥasanī (1554–1615) started this genre after a journey to the Ottoman Empire in 1594-95.[49] The final outcome of a *karalama* is comparable to abstract art.

The practice allows to experiment with many different types of connections between letters. Some *karalama* may display the measurements with the dots.[50] Sometimes the strokes are superimposed, literally blackening the paper, creating dense chaotic areas of writing. Numerous examples of *karalama* have been penned in the Ottoman lands. In figure 3.7 is an example of a *karalama* penned by Ahmed Karahisarî (1469–1556) and on display at the Sabancı Museum in Istanbul.[51]

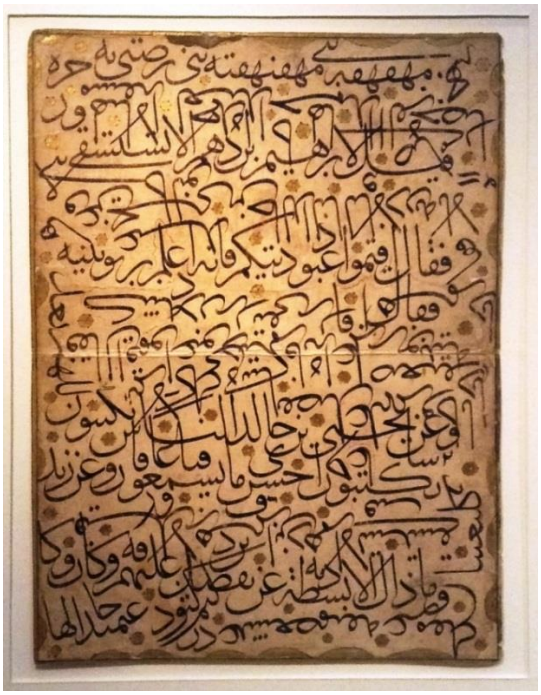

Figure 3.7 *Ahmed Karahisarî: karalama, Turkey, sixteenth century, 35 x 26.3 cm. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

[48] Roxburgh, 'The Eye Is Favoured', n. 5.
[49] Maryam Ekhtiar, 'Practice Makes Perfect: The Art of Calligraphy Exercises (Siyāh Mashq) in Iran', *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 112.
[50] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 49.
[51] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, 46–47.

In the contemporary tradition the practice is still continuing, both as a type of exercise, and as an art form.[52] Kutlu affirmed: 'We never waste the paper, and we learn how to use every space available in our practical exercises (*karalama*).'[53]

3.3.3 Calligraphic Compositions

The most difficult aspect of the calligraphic training, and of the practice of calligraphy later on, as a master, is constituted by the creation of compositions. When the student has mastered the element discussed so far, he or she is ready to start creating compositions.

From what I witnessed in calligraphic schools, when a student reached an advanced stage, he or she is able to create compositions, which every week will be shown to the master, who will comment not only on the shape of letters, but also on the use of the space, on the rhythm and balance of the composition, on the position of the diacritical marks, like dots and thin lines. The student will re-create the composition following the master's advice and will bring it back to be commented upon during the next lesson.

A calligraphic composition can take several shapes. Among many others, I can mention the shape of a circumference, or a composition inscribed within a circle filling all the inner space, or as an *istif*, a layered composition of text, where words are written one on the top of the other, or in the form of a pear. Chapter seven will explore the rich possibilities that Turkish calligraphers adopted in creating their manifold compositions. Özçay remarked that the art of calligraphy has some specific rules that cannot be easily broken. It is not possible to create an *istif* (a layered composition) for every sentence. Sometimes the calligrapher needs to find the shape into which the writing would fit: sometimes squared, sometimes cursive, sometimes rounded. The text that the calligrapher is writing mostly determines all of this. 'It depends on the possibilities that the text opens to you.'[54]

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[52] See, for instance, Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 101–7.
[53] Kutlu 01:10:56.
[54] Özçay 54:27.

Furthermore, Özçay revealed to me, during my visit to his studio, that the process for creating a composition is complex. First, a calligrapher visualises the composition in his or her mind, and then he or she tries to write it with a pencil on a piece of paper, as a sketch, composing a few possible versions. On this aspect, Çelebi told me that usually a calligrapher imagines the final product, keeping in the mind an abstract structure of what will be composed. However, it is not always possible to completely know in advance what will be the final version. Sometimes the writing cannot fit into the desired shape. The presence or the absence of *alif*s can deeply change the final outcome. The presence of *alif*s allows more possibilities and forms. Furthermore, only writing a composition on paper, rather than keeping it in the mind, allows to see if there is an unbalance, if the space is too congested or too empty of letters, or if the *haraket* are positioned in the right places. 'Sometimes you imagine something like an egg shape, but you end up with a circle. Sometimes is vice versa. The thing that you should do is to let the letters have their own shapes. You have to be convenient with their shapes and measurements.'[55]

After composing different sketches, Özçay told me that the process continues until the final form has been chosen, and the calligrapher is satisfied with it. After that, the artist proceeds in creating the final composition with all the calligraphic tools on special paper, marbled or treated with *ahar*. In Özçay's book an example of a sketch can be seen, and it can be compared with the final work.[56] Some sketches can be quite rough, from an artistic point of view, but they help the calligrapher in selecting the right shape or style, and in moving the textual material within the available space. In reference to one of his compositions, Özçay remarked the following:

> The most difficult calligraphic compositions are the circular ones. Searching through the history of calligraphy, one finds very few successful circular compositions. Even among some of the best-known compositions, diacritical and decorative marks were used to mask defects. The most important reason behind this difficulty is that the circular form affords the calligrapher little freedom of movement. Thus, it is difficult

[55] Çelebi 39:45.
[56] Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 48–49.

> to find texts that lend themselves to a circular composition. By contrast, oval and other forms of composition give greater flexibility in terms of shape and proportions. In such cases, the calligrapher can easily adjust the composition to fit the capacity and requirements of the text.[57]

The choice is also among the calligraphic styles to be used. *Sülüs* is one of the most suitable styles for creating a composition. In general, *ta'lîk* or *celî ta'lîk* are used for one-line panels, as they are not as suitable as *sülüs*. *Nesih* is used for regular writing. Kufic presents limited possibilities because of its rigid structure: it is not possible to adapt it to many forms, and it is not possible to have many different artistic interpretations of the same text. *Celî sülüs* is very adaptable and flexible, because each and every letter has many different forms, in isolation and in connection with the other letters. Turkish calligraphy explores the manifold forms of expression of the large *sülüs* in the form of panels. Calligraphers may create numerous different compositions of the same text, as both Kazan and Özçay referred to me. For example, the *basmala* in *celî sülüs* can have so many different interpretations, because of the flexibility of the style and the presence of many *alif*s.[58]

One of the most used examples of compositions is the already mentioned *istif* (layered composition). Commenting on this specific type of composition, the Depeler brothers affirmed that the name of God, should always appear at the top: 'If there is the word Allah in the verse, then we try to write it in the *istif* form, placing it on the upper parts of the composition. Since generally an *istif* is hard to read, the calligrapher should mind the clearness of the words as well as the symmetry of the composition.'[59]

An *istif* can be read usually from the bottom to the top, or from the top to the bottom. Some complex compositions may offer several possible readings at the same time, as one penned by Mustafa Rakım.[60] In figure 3.8 a layered composition of a Quranic verse can be seen, penned by Syed in *celî sülüs.*

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[57] Özçay, 48.
[58] Kazan 01:02:47.
[59] Depeler brothers 24:35.
[60] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 501–3.

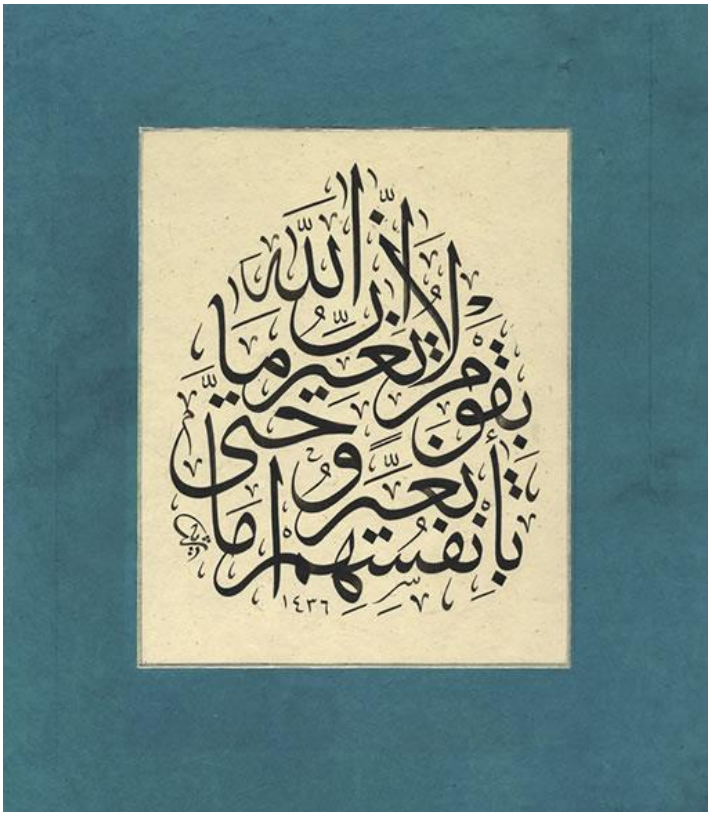

Figure 3.8 *Soraya Syed: Q. 13:11, Norway, 2005. © www.artofthepen.com*

The composition portrays the words 'Truly God alters not what is in a people until they alter what is in themselves' (part of Q. 13:11). The composition, in this case, is readable from the top to the bottom, and the name of Allah is at the very top, with its *alif* marking the symmetrical axis of the entire composition. Usually an *istif* is read from the bottom to the top. However, in this case the name of Allah appears at the beginning of the verse. For this reason, the calligrapher shaped the verse in order to be read from the top to the bottom, keeping the name of Allah in the upper part.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the forms that the calligrapher traces: the dot, the letters, and the words.

I have demonstrated that the point (*nokta*) is the first unit of measurement in the system of proportioned writing elaborated by Ibn Muqla, on which the Turkish

calligraphic tradition is rooted. Thus, the point is a symbol of synthesis, because all the forms are originated from it, and can be brought back to it. Some Islamic traditions refer to the point as the *summa* of all knowledge. According to Başar, the point is a symbol not only of the origins of letters, but also of the dynamism of the universe. A work by Kılıç showcases the relationship between the dot and the divine creative power.

The second section focused on the letters (*harfler*) and their mystical meanings. I have found a great variance of positions on letter mysticism among my participants. These positions include: (i) the acceptance of a mystic symbolism hidden behind letters by Kutlu and Özkafa, who provided some interpretations of the letters *alif* (symbol of oneness and beginning) and *wāw* (symbol of unity and completion), engaging with the philosophical literature of Ibn ʻArabī; (ii) the partial acceptance of a certain level of symbolism in Kılıç, Kurlu, and the Depeler brothers; (iii) the rejection of letter mysticism by Özçay, Çevik and Çelebi, who do not conceive any hidden meaning in letters. No calligrapher mentioned the use of Arabic letters in the construction of magical devices.

I finally illustrated the practice of the calligraphic exercise (*meşk*), from its beginning until its more advanced stages. I have shown that the practice starts with writing the prayer *Rabbi yessir*, for a not fixed period of time, which may fluctuate from a few lessons to some years, according to the will of the master. After that, the student learns how to trace dots and letters, first in their disjoined forms, and then in their combined forms with other letters (*müfredat meşk*). Subsequently, the student copies full sentences, which usually do not display anymore the measurement and the structure for building the letters (*mürekkebat meşk*). Once these two stages have been mastered, I showed that a calligrapher moves towards a higher level of creativity through the elaboration of compositions, on which I have exposed the technical comments and views by some of my participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TERRESTRIAL AND CELESTIAL BODIES

The title of this chapter has been evidently inspired by one of the *magna opera* by Henri Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*.[1] One of the main ideas of that book, drawn by Corbin from several Muslim philosophers and which in my understanding may perfectly reverberate within the valley of Islamic calligraphy, is that the corporeal and spiritual dimensions are not conceived as totally separated and antithetic. Those two dimensions rather represent two opposites within the continuum of the Real, constituted by a multitude of layers of existence and manifestations, or several celestial earths and terrestrial skies, using Corbin's terminology. Thus, in this chapter I will focus on the analysis of the body in Islamic calligraphy, an aspect never fully explored in scholarly literature before, under the light of the awareness that the whole universe, being created by God, is in itself a manifestation of spiritual creativity and numinous appearance (*tajallī*), at different degrees of intensity and reality. Thus, the importance and relevance of the body cannot be overestimated. The body is an essential tool and a vital instrument of the art of penmanship; without it, the art itself would not even exist. The body is a blessing and a token from God, and precisely through its medium, calligraphers may be able to express their love and service to the Creator, dedicating time, effort, pain and joy to the art of penmanship.

My analysis will be centred on three aspects connected to the bodily dimension, permeated by or associated to the spiritual: (i) the importance and centrality of the terrestrial and physical body of the calligrapher in the practice of the art, which can be seen as an act of embodiment itself and as an intense discipline of bodily control and of cultivation of human qualities, such as refinement, good manners, morals, decorum and decency; (ii) experiences of spiritual or physical

[1] Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, Bollingen Series 91, 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

healing through the medium of the calligraphic art; (iii) the importance of dreams in the world of contemporary Turkish calligraphy. The notion of a celestial body, or more specifically of a body made of the earthly elements of the celestial realm, refers in Islamic philosophy to *hūrqalyā* or *barzakh*, conceived as the realm of archetypical images, the imaginal[2] world of visions and dreams, and the location of intuitive and mystical experiences; a dimension in between the worlds of matter (*nasūt*) and spirit (*malakūt*).[3] In this chapter I will take into account only the oneiric body, showcasing some interesting dreams which emerged during the interviews I have conducted with calligraphers.

4.1 The Terrestrial Body

This section focuses on the body conceived in phenomenology as the *habitual body*, as opposed to the *present body*, whose perception takes place in the present moment through an act of direct awareness and apperception. Merleau-Ponty considers the *habitual body* as an outcome of the influence between the individual and the society in which the individual lives, since he or she assimilates and acquires in the body layers and layers of patterns, gestures, postures and manners bodily expressed by other human beings.[4] This assimilation is particularly important in calligraphy, within the significant relationship master-disciple. An aspirant calligrapher can learn calligraphy only from a living calligraphy master, listening to her or him, talking to her or him, observing her or his movements and gestures, following her or his living example and words, contemplating and paying attention to her or his *persona* as a whole. This aspect emerged from the interviews I conducted, and complementarily during my observation of calligraphic trainings in Istanbul. This section will analyse different, yet interconnected aspects of this process of assimilation and bodily absorption. First, I will outline calligraphy as an act of embodiment of the Divine Word; secondly, I will focus my analysis on calligraphy as a physical struggle, but

[2] See Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1976).
[3] Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 84–89.
[4] Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 32.

also as a way to empower senses and qualities such as concentration and control; finally, I will describe calligraphy as *adab*, or proper manners, through which the calligrapher is able to express human qualities such as respect and decorum, thanks to the way he or she expresses gestures, postures and bodily manners.

4.1.1 Embodiment of the Divine Word

The art of penmanship can be considered, first of all, as an act of embodiment of the Divine Word. The body can be conceived as a manifestation of the spiritual or as matter infused with spirit at the service of the Creator, in the process of committing to memory, and of writing over and over again, for a lifetime, His manifold sublime utterances. The centrality of the Quran has already been discussed in the previous chapters in reference to the traditional stream of Turkish calligraphy. It would not be untrue to affirm that the entire life of a calligrapher revolves around the Islamic holy book, and it constitutes an immersion and an absorption of it, at many levels, including the physical, mental, and emotional ones. It is interesting to note that numerous calligraphers during the Ottoman and contemporary traditions, memorised the Quran in its entirety. In fact, some of the most famous and distinguished Ottoman calligraphers were *ḥuffāẓ* (singular *ḥāfiẓ*), or memorisers of the holy book, as the eminent Hāfiẓ Osman (d. 1698).[5] This trend continued also in the contemporary tradition. For instance, it is worth to mention that Hasan Çelebi, talking about his personal calligraphic journey, stated that 'my journey started memorising the Quran, becoming a *ḥāfiẓ*'.[6] Not the entirety of calligraphers, though, memorised or are expected to memorise the complete text of the Quran. Notwithstanding this lack of obligation, I experienced that also those calligraphers who did not memorised entirely the holy book, know abundantly by heart entire sections of it and numerous specific verses, which they are able to cite in different occasions and on different topics, and which they are able to chant or recite, with reverence and respect, in the original Arabic language. As they have internalised the Quran within their minds and

[5] Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 62–71; Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 72–77.
[6] Çelebi 06:22.

hearts, they have also absorbed in their bodies, within their muscular tissues and brains, the divine verses in their exterior calligraphic forms through years and years of continuous practice and artistic production. In the informal conversations I had with calligraphers, particularly during the visit I paid to their studios, during which they often showed to me their old or most recent works, it emerged that they often write the same verses over and over again throughout the years, sometimes in different shapes and using different colours, and at the same time they are also looking forward to rendering new artistic interpretations or compositions of verses that they have never written before in their artistic career. Some of those verses have become an artistic block from a technical point of view, for instance because of the presence or lack of presence of some specific letters in a verse that may help or may make difficult the spatial conceptualisation and organisation of a composition. Thus, the calligrapher is often engaging with textual material drawn from the Quran, material that may have been rendered in artistic forms hundreds of times or that has challenged the calligrapher for some specific reasons, and on which the calligrapher spends a lot of effort and time – sometimes months, sometimes years – with the aim of eventually being able to successfully transfer those verses into art. In this specific sense, calligraphy is an act of constant embodiment of the Holy Words.

The calligrapher does not only focus the creative and artistic attention to the Divine Word, but he or she also constantly strives to embody the verses that he or she artistically perform into his or her life, both spiritually and physically. On this regard, Savaş Çevik reminds that 'the calligrapher should understand, believe in, and live the verse and then dedicate himself, both spiritually and bodily, to perform it in calligraphy.'[7] It is evident that not only a technical ability is required, but also the capacity to understand the verse at the intellectual and spiritual levels, and to subsequently transfer this understanding into the spheres of belief and practical life, in order to physically embody the verse. This connection has been clearly voiced also by Efdaluddin Kılıç, while he was explaining to me how calligraphy has the power to universally attract people closer to God through the Quran, which is artistically rendered in calligraphic compositions:

[7] Çevik 28:34.

> Calligraphy receives its power from the divine verses, I believe. And in the Quran God says 'We have given eyes, ears and hearts to human beings'.[8] That is repeated in many different ways. Eyes, ears and hearts. So, calligraphy produces things that are seen by the eye, and if you read or recite them, those are heard by the ears, and if you think and ponder on what you saw and heard – if you reflect about that – you may get a heartfelt understanding. In that light, calligraphic life, ways and disciplines are greatly involved with the Quran. So, whatever is the reason for the revelation of the Quran, calligraphy helps people to realise that reason and it enables people to connect to it.[9]

The physical and spiritual spheres are again deeply interrelated in Efdaluddin Kılıç's understanding. The intellectual, emotional and spiritual understanding, described by him as a *heartfelt understanding*, may happen only after the physical and sensorial perception of the Divine Word. Conceived in a circular way, the attainment of a spiritual understanding depends on the sensorial perception, and the bodily and practical realisation of that understanding, through the practice of a good life, happens after the intellect has grasped the meaning of a Divine Revelation and emotions have been stirred by that Revelation. Calligraphy is a means through which a Revelation may be physically preserved for the eyes to be seen and for the ears to be heard, and it is a gate for the understanding of the divine utterances, a gate for the translation of those verses into life. The same concepts have been also emphasised by Kutlu:

> When calligraphers pay attention only to technique, they are just workers, and theirs is not real calligraphy. What they produce are just empty imitations. When you have sacred letters and sentences and you try to write them, but you do not feel them, you do not live them, you do not experience them, then your calligraphy is not real.[10]

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[8] See Q. 46:26.
[9] Kılıç 49:50.
[10] Kutlu 01:43:30.

Kutlu stressed conclusively the importance not only of artistic technique, but of experiencing and translating into life the meanings of the artistic renderings, a common sentiment that emerged in all the interviews I conducted.

As an act of embodiment, calligraphy also presents several similarities with some practices of Sufism, where the body is conceived to be central to the spiritual and existential experience, as an exterior (*zāhir*) phenomenon of internal (*bāṭin*) realities.[11] Within the Turkish religious traditions, ritual practices of embodiment, such as *semah*, involve the use of dance and music as ways of worship: in the Bektaşi and Alevi traditions dance is conceived as a form of devotion and dynamic meditation,[12] and in the Mevlevi tradition, instrumental music, ecstatic dance and singing of sacred verses, prayers and poems are central forms of the spiritual practice.[13] Kutlu interestingly pointed out the similarities between Ottoman music and calligraphy, especially considering the aural or visual rhythmical aspects of both, and he stressed the importance of infusing feelings and emotions within artistic expressions, fully embodying the artistic creations.[14]

4.1.2 Struggle, Control, and Physical Empowerment

The practice of the art of penmanship can be seen as a constant bodily training and struggle, during which muscles, and organs of perception are refined and shaped in order to perfectly suit the tough requirements of the art. Calligraphy exists and

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[11] Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 27–49.
[12] Sinibaldo De Rosa, 'Aspetti Metodologici in Uno Studio Etnografico Sul Semah Degli Aleviti', *Recherches En Danse*, no. 5 (2016): 2.
[13] Walter Feldman, *Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire* (Berlin: VWB-Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1996), 85–87.
[14] 'Calligraphy and traditional Turkish music are related. Music is as abstract as calligraphy is. You can create music with something which you cannot touch and which possesses an abstract form, in other words with musical notes. You can perceive the waves of music, its ups and downs, and its rhythm. A person who does not know music and musical notes, would not understand the melody and rhythm. By paying attention to it, he would just listen to its outer form. If you read the notes then you will be able to sing the rhythm like that: *dum teka tekka duma, dum teka tekka*, with all its ups and downs. Calligraphy is just like music. You think that you read what is written there, like *bismillāh al-raḥman al-raḥīm*, but you understand the art only if you know it, only if you feel it. You have to live it and put emotions into it. If you see some musical notes, do sol la, but you are not able to interpret and live them, there is no music. In calligraphy it is the same, calligraphers experience and feel what they write, like *bismillāh al-raḥman al-raḥīm*. These are not just words or letters.' Kutlu 01:38:11.

continues to exist precisely because of the body and its incessant usage as a tool at the service of the art. Elements such as a correct posture, concentration, the control of the body, the capability to keep the same position for a long time, the correct breathing process, muscular memory, together with the strengthening of the hands and eyes, are all involved in the execution of the art and are vital to it. At the end of this section I will also discuss some similarities between calligraphy and the art of archery, discipline practiced by some renowned calligraphers.

The physical struggle implied in the study of the art of penmanship emerged in definition of the art given by Soraya Syed, when she characterised the learning stage of calligraphy – during which a lot of effort is projected into the acquisition of the mechanical muscular memorization of the correct letters' proportions – as a *jihād*, or as a struggle, a physical, moral and spiritual endeavour to conquer discipline.[15] She also defined the second stage, the one after obtaining the authorization to teach the art, the *ijāza*, as a different kind of *jihād*, a concept that will be elaborated in chapter five. Concentration and control of the body are qualities to be acquired from the early stages of the study of the art, and their importance clearly emerged both from the interviews and from the trainings that I have observed. Calligraphy requires extreme dedication, seriousness and devotion to the art, which may lead often to physical exhaustion. It is not surprising that Mehmed Özçay recalled that at the beginning of his calligraphic journey he would sometimes faint because his master was leading him to the limits of his capabilities of physical tolerance.[16] The idea of working until the exhaustion of physical energies reveals the importance of gaining control over the body and over the calligrapher's limitations. Savaş Çevik pointed out the significance of overcoming those physical limitations through the power of concentration, and focusing the awareness on the production of the calligraphic work:

> Concentration (*konsantrasyon*) is very important in this kind of art. You can find some ideas within you or catch some celestial inspirations only if you dedicate

[15] 'The first stage is a *jihād* and the second one is a *jihād* too, but in a different way.' Syed 19:13.
[16] Özçay 08:17.

> yourself bodily and mentally to the art, totally concentrating your body and mind in your work. And some compositions may appear as the outcome of an extremely hard work. And some other works may be attained in just a few minutes, because you have them in yourself, you have absorbed those shapes in your brain, and once you sit down, you draw them out of you, and then the composition is done. But both situations require your full concentration. And once you went through that really painful creative process, and you finish your composition – going through writing, ornamentation, and decoration, all of this – you become then so joyful! Because once you have had the inspiration and you know the composition you are going to create, you become really excited to see the final piece, and you totally dedicate yourself to it; you do not eat, you do not drink, you do not do anything else other than working on your art piece. Once you have finished a piece, it becomes part of you. Since you made such a great effort in creating your pieces of art, once these have been sold in exhibitions, you feel quite guilty. For example, sometimes I do feel really bad when some of my pieces have been sold.[17]

Interestingly in this complex passage Savaş Çevik describes some essential moments of the creative process, which necessitates dedication, concentration and control of the body, requiring sometimes to overcome even hunger and thirst, aspects that have been reported to me by several calligraphers during their informal conversations with me. It happens often that a calligrapher is able to sit and keep the same seated position for a long time, working exhaustedly until the art piece has been finally created, as expressed by Ayten Tiryaki as well.[18] Sometimes the dedication put into an art piece has been so intense, as expressed by Çevik, that a piece becomes a part

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[17] Çevik 01:06:36.

[18] 'Sometimes I sit down and I do not get up for six hours while I perform calligraphy uninterruptedly until my work has been done. And in those times I want to sit more and more, even if I already worked for such a long time. I think I could sit down and write for even twelve hours, without getting bored, if I would not need to pray, or to eat or to go to the bathroom. Sometimes my body hurts, especially my neck and my back. Sometimes it is painful. Sometimes I remind myself that I should get up, because my body is getting harmed by too much work. For some people it is really hard to sit down for such a long time, but in my case, it is really hard to get up and to stop what I am doing. I perceive being a calligrapher as a unique opportunity, because I think that calligraphers are unique human beings. If somebody has this spirit, has the job, has a life, and all those are in harmony, that person is really blessed and unique. That is a great luck. Some people may have a job, but they may not like the job they are doing. It is common to work in a job you do not like. In my case it is not like that at all, I love it.' Tiryaki 38:41.

of the calligrapher, a part of his soul from which he does not want to separate.[19] From Çevik's words emerged also the relevance of inspiration, which descends over the artist only when he fully concentrates on the work. This state of inspiration may be sometimes the fruit of exhausting hours spent on the creation of an art piece, or it may manifest abruptly, as a result of the presence of letters, forms and compositions already embodied in the calligrapher's brain and body, after years of intense exercise, practice and muscular memorisation. Ferhat Kurlu in similar terms described the creative process, labelling the moment when the artist is inspired to create a composition as the *eşref saati*, a propitious and honourable moment, when the artist feels to be inspired, and to be completely concentrated and focused: 'It is a special time. Sometimes I cannot do anything for days and days, and sometimes I can create my compositions in a very short amount of time and in a very beautiful way.'[20] In those moments Kurlu feels to be open to a sort of spiritual inspiration, a condition sometimes independent from the state of the body, but dependent on the state of his heart: 'This is not about the body, sometimes I do feel bodily well, but I do not feel inspired and I do not practice. On the contrary, for example, when I was ill after having had my surgery, I had practiced constantly.'[21]

An important element related to the relevance of the body within the creative process is related to the control of the breath. During my interviews, only Soraya Syed referred to that element, but Mahmud Yazır significantly pointed out the same concepts expressed by her.[22] Furthermore, my observation of the training of different calligraphers brought me to the conclusion that the breathing flow is always controlled, maybe unconsciously because of the imitation of the master – something that Syed reported – or as a natural result of the importance given to the tranquillity

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[19] 'I am sometimes sad when I sell one of my works because I put all my concentration, all my dedication, all my time on it, and I am selling it for a price. But it became as a part of my soul. It is like when you have a puppy in your house and you give it away just for money.' Çevik 01:11:12.
[20] Kurlu 01:04:18.
[21] Kurlu 01:05:32.
[22] 'One must hold one's breath while writing so that while the pen moves on, breath-like, the flow does not become "short of breath." To breathe in and out does not necessarily impede the manifestation of the pen's right, but it can give an artificiality to the flow.' Mohamed Zakariya, 'Mahmud Yazir and the Beauty of the Pen', accessed 29 May 2013, http://www.zakariya.net/resources/beauty_of_the_pen.html.

of the heart, a concept which will be explored in chapter five. On the breathing control Soraya Syed stated that

> I had people observing me while I am writing, and observing the state I am going to. It is a state of relaxation, and breathing is very important. My way of breathing changes. And during the process it changes again, especially when it is a final piece: sometimes I hold the breath, in order not to shake while moving and not to spoil the work. It depends if I am doing *karalama* or *meşk* or if it is a final piece. It takes time to go into that state. You need to write, and write, and write, and to warm up. And finally, to relax.[23]

Interestingly, Syed also explained how her mental state, her breath and the artistic outcome are all related, giving a clear and technical explanation on how and why the breathing process has to be controlled:

> When I practice calligraphy, I find myself into an emotionless mental state. Because if you are emotional, that affects your heart. And if your heart starts beating faster, it affects your breath, which spoils and alters your calligraphic trait. You have to be very peaceful and neutral, in your heart and in your mind.[24]

Syed confessed that she has not been taught directly how to technically alter the breathing process. She rather learnt that through the observation and imitation of her master, a central and recurrent aspect within the educational calligraphic training during which some teachings are transmitted with no technical explanation or intellectual elaborations: 'I learned how to breathe through the observation of my master, and I naturally absorbed that. I observed that in other calligraphers too.'[25]

Physical enhancement and empowerment, especially of hands and eyes, are features of the technical calligraphic training. Savaş Çevik revealed that he heard about this physical enhancement by some calligraphers and teachers of Islamic art

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[23] Syed 20:48.
[24] Syed 25:45.
[25] Syed 22:35.

history well before that he started to seriously study the art.[26] When I asked to him if the study and the practice of the art changed him as a person, the following has been his answer:

> Yes, absolutely, it changed me a lot. I will talk about the spiritual dimension, but before, there is a physical dimension as well. Especially, I have realized that you need to have perfect eyes that can see a fortieth part of a millimetre and you also need to have an ability to copy everything you see, in less than a minute. You start to learn how to have an amazing seeing ability, just as I mentioned before, you become able to see and to focus your attention to very tiny areas. The second ability you get is becoming able to imitate and copy a calligraphic piece exactly as it is.[27]

He then proceeded to explain the spiritual training and the practice of writing the prayer *Rabbi yessir* for a long time, something which has already been mentioned in chapter three and that will be further elaborated in chapter five. Going back to the physical dimension he later added that

> One could ask: what is the reason behind writing and studying only one sentence for three years? You can complete a University degree in three years! I will explain why, but let me bring some more tea. Two birds with one stone. The reason why they try so hard for such a long time is that the master wants to train calligraphers' eyes and hands. This intense physical training requires also a spiritual training, because it requires a lot of patience and endurance to continue the training itself. It is not so important to practice *Rabbi yessir* only, for months or years. If the practice of only one letter would be carried on, the effect would be the same, because the point here is to practice and to train eyes and hand, and to learn how to get acquainted with the *kalem*, and to adapt the hand to the art through a tough physical training. […] However, students do not consider all of that while they are practicing for many years *Rabbi yessir*, but their hands are getting trained, their eyes are getting trained, therefore they can improve their skills amazingly in that amount of time. But they do

[26] 'My professor Emin Barın used to mention the abilities of calligraphers. He would talk about some old talented calligraphers with sharped eyes who could even see a fortieth part of a millimetre.' Çevik 01:21.
[27] Çevik 09:22.

> not consider that. Indeed, many students give up, but the determined ones would improve their skills. Calligraphy students are like musicians who try to understand the instrument at the beginning, and they have a really hard time, but then once they understand how to play the instrument, they can easily advance in the art and they may start playing entire songs. But even then, a student of calligraphy would not have his *ijāza* in less than four or five years. And, of course, without having the *ijāza* no one can create a piece and sign it under his name, and no one can teach the art. This is the physical part of the story that every student has to face.[28]

In Savaş Çevik's account it is evident how important is the aspect related to the physical training which allows the calligrapher to perform the art. Ferhat Kurlu also emphasised the strictness of the training of hands and eyes in calligraphy, which has to abide to specific rules:

> The art of calligraphy is not like a normal art, it is not something that you can freely learn and perform. It is not something like post-modern art where you perform whatever you feel on the canvas. This art has specific rules. It will train your eyes, your sight, it will train your hands, to perform correctly. When a human being learns to perform this art, knows how to control himself and he learns what control means. Control is exactly what the art of calligraphy is all about. So, from this point of view, it can absolutely be said that the art of calligraphy changes people, changes the artists in a better way because of the control they reached. Referring to this control I talked about, I do not want to be misunderstood. This art possesses something really deep like eternity, but on the other hand it has something technical too that has to be learnt. You can create something new, but you have to abide to specific calligraphic rules in creating forms and compositions.[29]

Interestingly Kurlu connected the quality of control together with a specific training, consisting in the assimilation of the geometrical proportions of letters, as analysed in chapter three, that have to be learnt and absorbed within the calligrapher's muscular memory in order to be able to creatively produce new art works within the

[28] Çevik 17:19.
[29] Kurlu 12:38.

boundaries of calligraphic rules. In connection to the quality of control mentioned by Kurlu, Hasan Çelebi stressed in categorical terms the importance and the necessity of being peaceful and controlled in calligraphy, physically and mentally:

> You can see two types of people. One is peaceful in the heart, he can control his body, he does not move very much, he can sit down and perform his art for a long time, while the other one is restless, reckless, adventurous, and he does whatever comes into his mind. Both have a soul, but the valuable one is the former one. There is no value in being reckless.[30]

Another final aspect related to physical empowerment is the fact that some of the Ottoman calligraphers were practitioners of the art of archery. The master initiator of the Ottoman tradition, Şeyh Hamdullah, is remembered as an accomplished archer.[31] In the twentieth century, one of the most influential calligraphers, Necmeddin Okyai, was an eminent archer, to the extent that his nick name 'the archer' (*okyai*) became more famous than his real name (Figure 4.1). He signed all of his calligraphic pieces under that name. He learnt the art under the guidance of Seyfeddin Efendi, chief archer at the court of Sultan Abdülaziz (reigned 1861–1876).[32]

[30] Çelebi 21:40.
[31] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 46.
[32] Derman, 162.

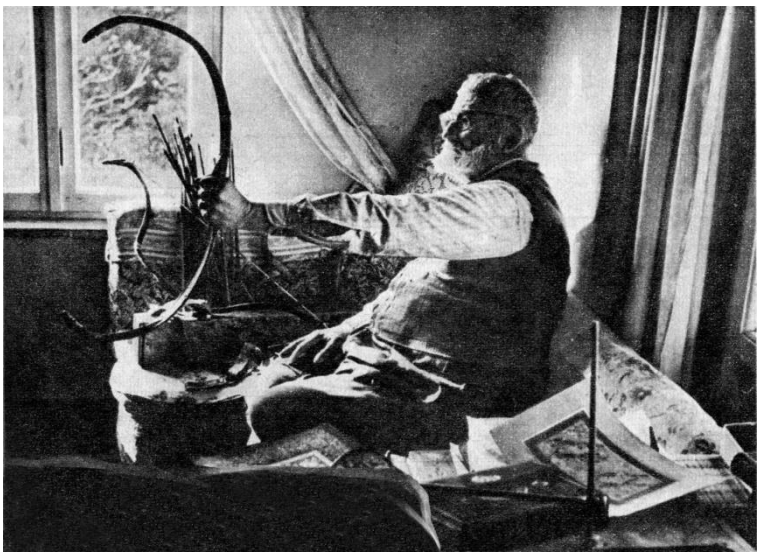

Figure 4.1 *The calligrapher and archery master Necmeddin Okyai inspecting an Ottoman bow. A calligraphic piece can be seen at the bottom right of the picture.*

As far as I know, in the contemporary tradition Efdaluddin Kılıç practices Ottoman archery, but it is possible that also other calligraphers try to follow the steps of the masters of the past practicing that martial art. Kılıç disclosed to me, during our private conversations, his serious interest in Ottoman archery, and he showed to me some pictures, kept on his phone, where he was practicing the art. Archery can be definitely described as an Islamic discipline, as it is directly reported in Islamic traditions that Prophet Muhammad himself was an archer and invited Muslims to practice archery, considering it a sign of strength.[33] One of the revered sacred relics (*kutsal emanetler*) kept at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, in the Pavilion of the Holy Mantle and Holy Relics, is Muhammad's bow. Archery is essential in Turkish culture, and the Ottomans elaborated a specific type of that discipline, using small and powerful bows, thanks to their specific shape. Precision, control of the breathing process, concentration, focus and utilising the visual power to the most, are all characteristics that both the art of calligraphy and the art of archery have in common.

[33] See, for instance, Book 20, Number 4711 and 4714, Sahih Muslim and Volume 4, Book 55, Number 592**,** Sahih Boukhari.

4.1.3 Adab

The importance of the terrestrial body, imbued with the qualities of the spirit, will be explored in this chapter taking into account the concept of *adab*, a complex cultural concept translatable as good manners, courtesy, respect, control, decency, dignity, politeness, moral, decorum, humanness, kindness and refinement.[34] The notion of *adab* is of extreme importance within the Sufi and the Mevlevi traditions, seen as the way a believer interacts with the world with the awareness that the Divine Presence is always reflected everywhere.[35] This concept emerged several times during the interviews I had with calligraphers. Often in the Ottoman and Turkish contemporary traditions, calligraphers expressed the importance and their respect towards *adab* rendering into calligraphy the invocation '*adab yā hū*', which literally can be translated as 'courtesy/decency O He!', in which *hū* is the pronoun 'he' referring to God in the state of His complete and absolute transcendence and sublimity, where it is not possible to denote Him with the pronoun 'you'. The invocation can be translated also as 'O God! [Please grant us] courtesy/decency'. The calligrapher Seyit Ahmed Depeler translated it to me as 'decency, please!'[36] When I visited the studio of the Depeler brothers in Konya, Seyit Ahmed was completing his last calligraphic piece, which was precisely '*adab yā hū*' (Fig. 4.2 and 4.3).

[34] See F. Gabrieli, 'Adab', ed. P. Bearman et al., Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition 1 (1986): 175–76.
[35] Ibrahim Gamard, 'Adab in the Mevlevi Tradition', Dar al-Masnavi, accessed 4 July 2017, http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/adab-mevlevi.html#Adab%20in%20the%20Masnavi.
[36] Depeler brothers 20:38.

Figure 4.2 *Seyit Ahmed Depeler: Adab Yā Hū! Konya, 2012. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Figure 4.3 *Seyit Ahmed Depeler writing his last work at the time of our interview. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Ferhat Kurlu, describing the bodily control required in the art of penmanship, illustrated to me the importance of *adab*, conceived as the way the calligrapher interacts with the world around him, and involving the manners through which he manifests respect and decency, including through his gestures and language:

> The control that you need in the art of calligraphy is similar to the one possessed by gentlemen in the West: they have to behave towards women in certain ways, they have to behave in public spaces in certain ways… This does not come out as a natural thing, it is the outcome of being trained. The control required in calligraphy is something like that. It means control of your soul, control of the way you behave, you move, you communicate, and control of the way you govern your emotions.[37]

In similar ways Efdaluddin Kılıç, while describing the sense of deep connection with the Creator that may emerge as a result of a serious intellectual and spiritual reflection on the meanings of calligraphic pieces, stated that:

> When you feel the Creator in your heart, you become deeply aware of Him. You show your respect to everyone, you cannot walk around like an animal. This changes your behaviour, this changes your form, your body form, and all of your manners and gestures, and the way you interact with everything around you.[38]

These words reinforce and clarify the connection between calligraphy and good and proper manners. As it has already been pointed out, a calligrapher is supposed to embody the verses he or she writes into life, also through the practice of *adab*, centred on the concept of respect and dignity, gentleness and politeness. This concept can be further understood by the following section of the interview I had with Hüseyin Kutlu, where he wanted to detail an example of something he considered to be a perfect illustration of *adab* in Turkish culture. He explicitly said that to understand calligraphy it is necessary to understand the underpinnings of what he considers to be Islamic civilisation and *adab*. His aim was also to convey not only concepts, but also feelings and emotions, since according to him calligraphy can be better grasped and understood not only intellectually, but also spiritually and

[37] Kurlu 16:44.
[38] Kılıç 15:40.

emotionally.[39] When I asked to him to describe his experience of calligraphy, the following has been his answer:

> As a first point, when you start to study this art you have to grasp and understand Islamic civilisation (*medeniyet*). I would like to differentiate between civilisation and the concept of *medeniyet*, which is different from the Western concept of civilisation. Civilisation in the West means to make people civilised, it comes from the above, and it moves from the top to below. This civilisation, or I would better say the narrative and rhetoric of civilisation in the West, often consists in colonising and imperialising the non-Western world. America, France, Britain, Italy and all the other colonisers used the same rhetoric in colonising the world in the past. Today this rhetoric, this perception of the colonisers still exists, and you see different examples of that. The only difference is that where you find petroleum and oil, then you find the colonisers, Americans and British people. And you find the rhetoric of colonisation. The reason why I am telling all this is because I believe these topics are very related to Islamic civilisation, and you need to see the distinction between the rhetoric of civilisation in the West and Islamic civilisation, so that you will understand the concept of *medeniyet* and then you will understand the art. This is not political at all, the reason why I am telling this at the beginning refers to the possible question: 'how Islamic calligraphy can be understood in the West?'[40] [...] Maybe I should give you an example to fully grasp what I mean by *medeniyet,* telling you how Mevlevi dervishes were accepted into a *tekke*. Maybe from that point of view you will be able to catch what calligraphy entails. Usually in the modern world we have application forms, asking questions about the applicant... this is the world we live in. At that time, in the past, wouldn't people know how to read and write? Of course, they knew how to read and write. The method I will tell you about has not been chosen by people who did not know how to read and write. So, when an aspirant Mevlevi dervish entered into a *tekke*, he was sent to the kitchen. They called

[39] 'In my view the art of calligraphy is not what you see in books at all. I am telling you these stories because I want you to make you feel, not only to understand with the intellect, but to feel what it is behind the art of calligraphy. To be able to understand this art you must have the right perceptive, open and subtle soul [he blew several times on his fingers, closed first together in one point, and after that completely opened], so subtle that someone cannot understand what is happening behind that great soul.' Kutlu 01:07:38.
[40] Kutlu 4:21.

it *matbâh-ı şerif*, the holy kitchen. That kitchen was not a place where you could cook an ordinary dish; there you could understand how food was transformed and how after that process food reached its own maturity. At the same time, you would understand how you can transform yourself and reach your own maturity. The head man of the kitchen was called Kazancı Dede, the chief of the cauldron, but he is not an ordinary cook. This man knows how human beings may add different tastes and savours to themselves, just as he knows how to add different tastes and savours to the food they cook in his kitchen. [*Kutlu laughed, he got up and started a theatrical sketch, going around the room impersonating the Sufi aspirant*]. Let's assume this place is a kitchen. Once you enter from the door, on the right you find a tiny place, a small spot where you find the fur of an animal on the top of it. Once you enter, you do this. [*Kutlu bowed down respectfully, crossing his hands and forearms on his chest*]. This means: 'I give up on everything I know until now'. This means: 'I am coming here to learn, not to be arrogant'. To Kazancı Dede you say: 'Just like potatoes and aubergines will be cooked and transformed, and they will become a great dish, so please help me to find myself, to reach a new level in my maturity'. And Kazancı Dede points to the tiny place close to the entrance with the fur on the top of it. He does not say anything. It is not like today when we have application forms and interviews. He does not ask who you are, what you are doing... he just points in silence to that place. The student who enters the *tekke* learns how to communicate without the tongue. And he sits like that on the fur, in a very proper manner [*Kutlu sat down respectfully with his knees on the ground*]. This means that you are respectful. It shows your *adab*. The aspirant dervish sits there for three days and observes. He sits there without saying anything at all. When he is sleeping, he will use a stick to hold his head, like that [*Kutlu showed me how the head was held by a T shaped stick called müttekâ placed under the chin and positioned in front of the aspirant dervish*].[41] He does not lie down. He will sleep in this seated position. He can go out only for *namaz* and to use the toilet. It is not like in a modern kitchen where everyone shouts, here nobody speaks, nobody says anything, and everyone keeps silence (*hamuş*). We also call graveyards *hamuşan*, places of silence. The Mevlevi turban also indicates the graveyard stone. From now on they will call the

[41] For examples of the *müttekâ* see Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)*, 186–89.

> aspirant dervish *can*, which means heart, life. If that person decides to stay because he realised that he can make it, then he stays in the *tekke*. If he thinks that he cannot make it, then with the same respect showed before, by embracing his body and bowing like that, he must leave. In these three days Kazancı Dede will look at him without letting him know if he can make it or not. If he thinks that he cannot make it, he does not say: 'no, you can't make it, please leave' [*laughs*]. The student sits down without his shoes, and they put his shoes in that direction, towards him. If Kazancı Dede thinks that he cannot make it, the only thing he does is turning his shoes the other way around, ready to be worn. So, the aspirant understands, he wears his shoes and then he leaves. In this modern world what we perceive as good, it is often a mistake from a Sufi point of view. In Turkish modern culture, just to be good and welcoming to guest, we turn the shoes so that guests would find their shoes ready to be worn, but we do it because we think that we are respectful and welcoming. In a *tekke* we do find it as a mistake, because guests, according to *adab*, should leave without turning their backs to their hosts. All that story was only a small example I wanted to tell, because this civilisation created the art of calligraphy. The art of calligraphy is an outcome of all these experiences, of a civilisation, of a lifestyle (*hayat tarzı*), and of proper manners (*adab*). There would be many other examples to tell.[42]

This complex and fascinating story shows how Kutlu considers calligraphy as an expression of a culture based on proper manners, patience, and respect. According to him, calligraphy is not about learning several artistic techniques, but it is one of the manifestations of what he conceived to be Islamic civilisation, as opposed to the concept of Western civilisation. The attitude demonstrated in the story by the aspirant dervish is very similar to the one that has to be shown by the aspirant calligrapher in relation to his or her master. As the dervish has to control the body, to be willing to transform himself or herself, and to be willing to be mystically cooked by the Divine Fire, using a similar metaphor to the ideas expressed by Kutlu in his story, so the novice calligrapher has to control and train his or her body, has to show respect and patience, and has to be willing to do something which he or she may not

[42] Kutlu 44:05.

understand for quite a long time, such as writing the prayer *Rabbi yessir* for months or years before starting to learn the art. Both practices have been described by Kutlu as an outcome of a complete life style and of proper manners. The importance of these aspects has been emphasised by Kutlu's zeal to theatrically enact the story he was narrating, giving life to the concepts he wanted to convey to me with the full use of his body, as a way to show the importance of the qualities, such as patience and respect, which he wanted to depict and which according to him are essential in calligraphy.

4.2 Health and Art

This section will take into consideration the healing dimension of calligraphy, that is, reported cases of healing of some sort, supposedly taking place thanks to the practice of the art. This dimension emerged specifically only once during my interviews, with Ayten Tiryaki, and in another interview delivered by Hasan Çelebi to *Islamica Magazine*.[43] Some aspects of the physical empowerment of eyes and hands reported above by Çevik and Kurlu, and the capacity to keep the same bodily position for a long time, ignoring pain, reported by Çevik, Tiryaki, Kazan, Çelebi and Kurlu, may also be considered within the healing dimension of the art, but in this section I will focus on two clearer and striking examples, the cases in which physical or mental distress disappears when practicing calligraphy as described by Ayten Tiriaki, and the case of the old shaking hands of Hasan Çelebi stopping to tremble only when he practices calligraphy. Finally, I will report an episode of a composition penned by Mehmed Özçay, written with the intention of soothing the tired spirit of a friend.

Notwithstanding the very few instances of episodes of healing related to calligraphy reported to me, it is possible to comprehend those episodes contextualising the connection that the written word had with healing and protection since the Ottoman times. In particular, the usage of numerous devices show how sacred verses, Divine Names, prayers and invocations were written on different objects, such as pendants, talismans, amulets, medicinal bowls, magic squares, and

[43] Syed, 'Interview'.

Ottoman talismanic shirts, with the aim of granting healing and protection.[44] Furthermore, in the understanding of Ottoman science, the relationship between art and psychological wellbeing was well known, to the extent that a complex of buildings, including a hospital (*darüşşifa*), a mosque, a retreat centre and a research institute, was founded in Edirne in the fifteenth century, the Sultan Bayezid II Külliyesi, where patients where healed through the arrangements of beautiful perfumed gardens, with flowing melodious water, and in which the use of music in a spacious concert room was the most important part of the therapy, especially used to heal mental illnesses.[45] Today the complex is a museum on Ottoman science, and a big section of the museum is dedicated to the study of the positive influence of different Ottoman melodic tunes to several mental pathologies. I visited the complex and I can attest that its gardens are of striking beauty and that a great atmosphere of serenity and peace may be found there. The recently passed away Turkish psychologist and Sufi master, Oruç Güvenç, continued the tradition of using music with the purpose of soothing pain and mental illnesses, using also flowing water as one of the instruments on stage, together with *ney* and *oud*.[46] Contemporary science advanced some theories on the relevance of art in some healing processes and on the therapeutic benefits of art practices.[47]

On the healing influence of the art of penmanship over the body, Ayten Tiryaki revealed her experiences and views:

> When I practice calligraphy, I feel tranquillity and peace in my heart. This is a very important aspect and a very different experience from everyday life. We talk about this topic every time with my students, and this is an endless topic. There are many dimensions to this state of mind, but the most important is the spiritual one. I perceive calligraphy as devotion to Allah (*ibadet*). And sometimes it happened that

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[44] Leoni et al., *Power and Protection*, 53–65; Maddison and Savage-Smith, *Science, Tools & Magic*, 1:106–9, 117.
[45] Nurettin Heybeli, 'Sultan Bayezid II Külliyesi: One of the Earliest Medical Schools—Founded in 1488', *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* 467, no. 9 (2009): 2457–63.
[46] 'Dr. Rahmi Oruc Guvenc', Group for the Research and Promotion of Turkish Music, accessed 21 July 2017, https://tumata.com/en/tumata/dr-rahmi-oruc-guvenc/.
[47] Rachel Hajar, 'Art and Healing', *Heart Views* 16, no. 3 (2015): 116; Martha Threlkeld, 'Art and Healing', *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 6 (2003): 496–98.

> students with migraine, for example, they would come here and after writing and practicing calligraphy, they got rid of their physical problems. I think that calligraphy is like a therapy, without exaggerating, experiencing different forms of healing is what is happening during lots of my classes.[48]

This interesting passage reveals that Tiryaki considered the existence of multiple dimensions of being related to calligraphy, from the sheer spiritual one to the physical one. I will elaborate on the concept of calligraphy as worship in chapter six. Interestingly, in the above passage Tiryaki connected peace and tranquillity to all of those dimensions, suggesting that that state of serenity may positively influence the physical aspects of the art practitioner. On this regard she reported that several students experienced episodes of healing, above all of migraine, which often has psychosomatic roots. When I asked Tiryaki if she experienced herself some forms of healing, that was her answer:

> Sometimes at work or because of other events in my life, I may feel much stressed. But when one of my students comes bringing a very unique calligraphic composition, then I lose any trace of bad feelings in me. I may feel relieved, I may feel very positive feelings and I get rid of all the stress. To describe those feelings, I can say that it is like eating a very special and delicious (*güzel*) meal. It is a special feeling of peacefulness coming to me; it is like enjoyment of a good meal or of performing your prayers, or speaking to the Lord.[49]

The feelings expressed by Tiryaki are all related to qualities such as peacefulness, tranquillity, enjoyment and communion with the Divine. Of some interest is the importance that she gave to the positive and stress relieving effects in witnessing the progress of her students. She mostly connected the healing dimension of calligraphy to her enjoyment in seeing her students advancing in the art. On the relationship with her students and the healing atmosphere of her classes, she observed:

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[48] Tiryaki 28:47.
[49] Tiryaki 31:21.

> Sometimes when I am teaching I show how to write the letters. Whether I write for myself or for my students, when the performance has been satisfying I feel myself peaceful and good (*güzel*). I have the feeling that something is coming together in a good way. If pen, ink and paper are in harmony and well bounded to each other, I feel good, but if they do not cooperate well in the writing process, then I feel stressed. And then you do not like what you are doing, or sometimes you have headaches, or other kind of pain, because you feel that your art is not going anywhere. And then you start sweating… If everything is in harmony, then you do not want to stop and leave your work, you want to continue and stay at your table, writing and writing. Sometimes when I have students, and I am performing, and I am enjoying that moment, I want to continue and I say to my students: 'Please, prevent me from doing this, because this will take me so much time, I will enjoy it and I will not move from the table, then if I will not move on, you will not be able to learn anything.' [*laughs*]. This is such a pleasure! There is another point. I think that the environment of calligraphy has a healing effect also because everyone comes here with positive emotions and attitude, nobody creates tensions or negative feelings. The therapeutic dimension is also connected to that.[50]

Tiryaki described the state she found herself when the writing delightfully flows and all the tools are in harmony, as, again, a state of peacefulness. In those moments the enjoyment and satisfaction of teaching and beautifully writing led her to forget about time and to ignore the discomfort of staying seated, keeping the same bodily position, for a long period. I find her final remarks on the positive atmosphere of calligraphy classes of great interest. I can attest that during my observations of the calligraphic training, the atmosphere among practitioners is always very relaxed. Students alternate moments of seriousness, silence and complete concentration, to moments of relaxation and enjoyment of tea, conversation and laughs. The impression left on me is the one of mutual respect and encouragement between students. Under that light, it is not surprising that the respectful and serene atmosphere, together with the positive attitudes of practitioners during a calligraphy class, may have a soothing effect, and may dissipate distress or negative emotions.

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[50] Tiryaki 37:45.

The last episode related to healing and calligraphy has been reported by the great master Hasan Çelebi to *Islamica Magazine*, in an interview conducted by the calligraphy master and student of Çelebi, Soraya Syed. The question by Syed was about the requirements necessary to become a master calligrapher, but Çelebi's answer revealed something interesting to our discussion too:

> The first requirement is to love the art. Love comes before skill. If someone does not desire Islamic Calligraphy, they will not succeed. Today, I cannot write the Latin alphabet as my hand shakes too much. When I try to read a book, I cannot read more than fifteen pages without falling asleep. But with Islamic Calligraphy, my hand stays steady and there are times where I can study the art ten hours or more without lifting my head, because I love it. It is also necessary to have patience, to have a good teacher and a good working environment. It is important to be writing every day, especially when you are a beginner. I tell my students they must put in thirty hours a day![51]

This passage is of great interest on multiple levels. First, it centres on the relevance of love and total dedication to the art. It also reveals that the old calligraphy master, experiencing a condition of aging and decline of his capabilities, is nonetheless able to regain focus, clarity and physical strength only when he is practicing his beloved art. I can confirm the tremble of his hands, noticed during our interview. This condition does not stop him to continue to teach the art to his numerous students all around the world, and to achieve steadiness every time his hand holds the *kalem* again.

Finally, a calligraphic piece may become a token of affection, created with the intention of relieving the pain of a soul. Mehmed Özçay revealed to me that he composed a particular piece for a friend who 'was having a hard time, and after receiving that gift he felt like being relieved.'[52] In his book Özçay uncovered that he promised to write some specific verses for his friend, and once he visited and saw

[51] Syed, 'Interview', 129.
[52] Özçay 58:11.

him tired and low, he decided to fulfil his promise.[53] The artwork is composed in *celî sülüs* with two poignant verses from the Quran 'For truly with hardship comes ease! Truly with hardship comes ease!' (Q. 94:5-6). The composition appears perfectly balanced and rhythmic, where the repetition of the words is mirrored by the rhythmic repetition of the calligraphic strokes (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 *Mehmed Özçay: Fa inna maʿa al-ʿusri yusran. Inna maʿa al-ʿusri yusran, Istanbul, 1996, 41.5 x 67.5 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

4.3 The Oneiric Body

Dreams and visions have been elements central to Muslim spirituality and religiosity, perceived, when dreams were considered not to be produced by demons or by the human mind, as signs from God being able to guide and orient human decisions in everyday life, and as ways to be in contact with souls from the spiritual realm.[54] The Quran itself reveals in its pages multiple references to dreams (*ruʾyā* or *manām*)[55] and their interpretation, which appear to be central in the story of Prophet Joseph (Q.

[53] Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 26–27.
[54] Nile Green, 'The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13, no. 3 (2003): 287–313.
[55] See Q. 8:43; 10:64; 12:5; 12:43; 12:100; 17:60; 30:23; 37:102; 37:105; 39:42; 48:27.

12). In Q. 48:27 the conquest of Mecca has been supposedly revealed in a dream to Prophet Muhammad, before the concretisation of the event. Dreams have been central to the spiritual life not only of religious people, such as prophets or Sufi mystics, but they extended their influence to the broader Muslim society. Dreams had indeed an impact on the development of history, considering that some Ottoman Sultans where sometimes taking their political decisions also following their dreams and their interpretations.[56]

According to Schimmel it was a mystical dream which inspired Mīr ʿAlī Tabrīzī (fifteenth century) in creating the style *nastaʿlīq*, in which its wings-like letters remind the flying grouse he saw in his dream.[57] Ottoman calligraphers reported dreams in which they have been instructed by the masters of the past.[58]

In the contemporary Turkish tradition, a recurrent dream consists in interacting with calligraphers of the Ottoman times or with contemporary masters.[59] I will report below dreams narrated to me by Fuat Başar, Hasan Çelebi and Hilal Kazan, who all testified that those dreams are very recurrent among practitioners of the art of penmanship. Sometimes, Ottoman masters are reported to teach the art in dreams, encouraging or giving counsels about how to execute better calligraphic pieces, as stated by Hasan Çelebi:

> I was asked to restore a piece of calligraphy in a mosque written by Mustafa Rakım Efendi.[60] This was very difficult for me, since I did not have the *ijāza* yet, I spent a whole week worrying about how to repair the piece. While I was wondering whether I was able to do it or not, I had a dream. Both Hamid *hattat*[61] and Rakım Efendi were there and they were examining a piece of calligraphy together. Rakım Efendi was wearing a turban. He was short and stocky like a wrestler. Rakım Efendi, aware of my presence, turned to me and said, 'Son, you will do it, you can do it!' I cannot

[56] Özgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh, *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies* (State University of New York Press, 2012), 249–72.
[57] Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 9.
[58] See, for instance, Özkafa, 'İstanbul ve Hat Sanatı', 128; Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 147.
[59] For instance, 'I dream about calligraphy. I dream to visit (*zyaret*) old calligraphers like Mustafa Râkım or Hamid Aytaç, and to learn from them. And now I dream about Uğur Derman and Mehmed Özcay too, my masters.' Özkafa 50:02.
[60] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 98–99; Derman, *Eternal Letters*, 150–55.
[61] Hamid Aytaç, master of Çelebi.

> forget this dream or how happy made my teacher and me. When I told Hamid *hattat* my dream, he started to weep profusely. That memory will stay with me; I cannot forget it.[62]

When I asked to Çelebi if he could remember some dreams related to calligraphy and which he considered of some personal importance, he described to me a dream he had at a point in his life when he had already reached his *ijāza*, and when his previous master Hamid Aytaç was not alive anymore. Thanks to that dream he was able to find a way to improve one of his art pieces he was working on:

> There is a specific experience I can tell you about. I remember writing a calligraphic work and I was not satisfied with it, I was not mature at that time in the art of calligraphy, but I already achieved my *ijāza*. I saw Hamid Bey[63] in my dream and I showed him the piece I had written. And he said to me that the *haraket*[64] were too thin. In the morning I got up and I made them thicker, and I realised that the final outcome was really good.[65]

He also explained through a touching story why, according to his understanding, so many novice calligraphers are having dreams in which they are taught the art by him:

> The last generation of calligraphers usually experiences visions of their masters in their dreams. Even if they do not study with me, they dream about me. There is a reason behind it. I will tell you a story to explain why they have these dreams. A dervish visited his master and he said to him: 'I want to see Prophet Muhammad in my dream.' The master replied: 'Yes, if you want to see him, put a lot of salt in this water bottle and then drink it before going to sleep.' He drank the very salty water, and while sleeping in his dreams he saw drops of water, rivers, and waterfalls. He went back to his master in the morning and he said: 'I have seen only water in my

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[62] Syed, 'Interview', 129.
[63] Hamid Aytaç.
[64] In Arabic *ḥarakāt*, diacritics signalizing the short vowels, which normally are not included in the script. In calligraphy they are usually added both because they increase readability and clarity to the text portrayed, and because of aesthetic purposes, especially in scripts such as the *celî sülüs*.
[65] Çelebi 27:18.

> dreams.' The master replied: 'Since you needed water, you dreamt about it. If you fall in love with the Prophet, you will see the Prophet in your dreams.' The students of calligraphy see their masters in their dreams because they are in love with the art of penmanship. They are full of love, and that is why they see their masters so frequently in their dreams.[66]

According to Çelebi a spiritual presence and guidance from another world is not involved in the majority of the dreams narrated by students, which are described as an effect of their love for the art and their masters. During the interview I had with Çelebi, Hilal Kazan – student of Çelebi as well – was present, and when the calligraphy master finished to relate his story, she asked to me to intervene, adding other examples:

> I would like to tell you two examples of dreams I heard about my master. The first dream is about one of *hoca*'s students of calligraphy. She decided to drop the course, but the following week she came back to Hasan Çelebi and she told the dream that she had. She saw her master in her dream, and he was not talking to her, while he was talking to every other student. Therefore, she felt guilty, and came back the week after, having decided to resume the course. Another story is related to a *müzehip*[67]. She practices illumination, but she also had the desire to practice calligraphy. She came to Hasan Çelebi asking his consent to learn the art from him, but he denied saying that it is better to focus on one art only and he suggested her to continue what she was already doing. Even if she was very passionate, she did not start studying calligraphy. One day she saw Hasan Çelebi in her dream, where he said to her that she could start studying calligraphy. Now she is taking calligraphy classes from Davut Bektaş at Mimar Sinan University.[68]

Evidently dreams are perceived as guiding and influencing people's lives, as in those two cases of students deciding to commit again to the art, in the first case, or to start to learn the art in the second case, even though in real life she was advised not to.

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[66] Çelebi 30:17.
[67] Practitioner of the art of *tezhip*.
[68] Çelebi (with Kazan) 33:30.

Hilal Kazan was aware that Hasan Çelebi, notwithstanding his recognition of the importance of dreams in very precious instances, does not confer to dreams too much importance: 'I know *hoca* does not like these examples. But I really wanted to tell you these stories.'[69] Kazan gave voice to the numerous calligraphy students who are experiencing those dreams, and her willingness to tell me those stories emphasises that those elements are considered to have some importance within this art tradition. She finally added: 'The interesting thing is that seeing your master in your dreams usually happens when the master passed away, but Hasan Çelebi is still alive, and many calligraphy students see him in their dreams.'[70] One of the themes of those calligraphy dreams is to be instructed by an Ottoman legend in the field. Apparently, the fame of Hasan Çelebi reached such a weight that many students, all over the world, are dreaming of being instructed by him.

Fuat Başar narrated to me another kind of dreams, one where he was guided on the path of the art by a person, with some specific characteristics, whom he was able to recognise and identify as a famous Ottoman calligrapher only after the dreams already occurred, and after doing some research on academic literature. Phenomenologically, this is an example of an encounter with a celestial body, using Corbin's terminology, or with a soul from another realm who instructs and guides on the path of calligraphy:

> When I was in Erzurum, previously, I would see often somebody in my dreams. He was slim and had a stubble beard, usually wearing a beige robe. He was instructing me how to write the letters in my dreams. This person was not my master, Hamid Aytaç. I learned later on that this person was Şevki Efendi, whom I read about in some academic sources, but at that time I had no idea about who he was. Every time he sneaked in my bedroom from the window. He would have a sieve, turned inside out, and he used to place paper on it to show me how to write the letters. Then he would go out from the window again. Şevki Efendi was the best calligrapher in *sülüs* and *nesih*. I learned this by reading some biographical books about him. This is a recurring event in the history of calligraphy, something that happened many other

[69] Çelebi (with Kazan) 37:00.
[70] Çelebi (with Kazan) 37:22.

> times previously. Şevki Bey used to say that he learnt calligraphy in his dreams. Şevki Bey died in 1887 and after 90 years this sequence of dreams was happening to me. He taught me what I learnt, and what I know now is what he taught me.[71]

It is of great interest that exponents of the traditional stream of calligraphy are willing to portray the tradition as unfolding through time and centuries not only as an outcome of hard work and exercise, but also as having an element of spiritual nature so central in the Islamic religion, such as the one of visions of celestial beings or passed souls, who, in the case of calligraphy, are guiding and instructing artists in the development of the art. When I asked Fuat Başar if those dreams were still taking place in his life, that was his answer:

> No, not now. I do not see Şevki Bey in my dreams anymore, but I have heard from other calligraphers from Turkey, and from abroad, that they are taking their lessons from myself in their dreams. History repeats itself. I would believe in these dreams, because I have been a student in dreams myself, but I do not think I possess such a strong spirituality, I do not think I am that kind of special person. I do not have unique characteristics. Furthermore, I do not know the persons and people who are saying that they are learning from me in their dreams.[72]

When I asked Başar if he was conscious and aware when he is teaching calligraphy in the world of dreams to students, he honestly replied with a firm and calm voice:

> No, never. I have never felt that, when it is happening, and I am very surprised when I hear those personal stories. As far as I understand, this is not about the spirituality of the people who teach in dreams, or about how more spiritual you are than other people; but it is related to being tasked by God to teach. My master, Hamid Aytaç, would always say that he was sent to the world by Allah as a calligrapher, being tasked to teach and transmit this art to the present generation.[73]

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[71] Başar 14:20.
[72] Başar 30:33.
[73] Başar 32:30.

It is not totally clear to me how exactly Başar made sense of those experiences, nevertheless I can conclude from his words that he thinks that those dreams are not products of the minds of students, but are real experiences of an otherworldly dimension, or better to say, an infrawordly dimension, the one of the imaginal world. Even if he believes that he does not consciously teach the art in that dimension, he still thinks that teaching and transmitting the art is the task destined by God to some specific calligraphers, and that probably explains why those visions are taking place among his students or other practitioners of calligraphy.

The last example of dreams related to the art of penmanship has been narrated again by Fuat Başar and consists of a dream experienced by his master Hamid Aytaç, where, as in the case of the dream of Hasan Çelebi, the vision granted him to perfect and to accomplish a calligraphic work:

> When my master Hamid Bey could not accomplish a composition, or he could not achieve what was his initial thought, in his dreams he was able to see the final version of his compositions. For example, at the main gate of the Şişli Camii there is a symmetrical *levha*. There is a verse from the Quran that my master wrote for the mosque. When he was trying to write this verse, there was one *lam-elif*[74] he could not fit into the composition. When he realized he could not fit it in it, he laid down in his bed, right along the table where he was working, he gave up and turned to Allah in a state of *teslimiyet*[75]. A dream came to him. In his dream, he saw two *lam-elif*s coming from above towards him, pulsating with radiant light. Both letters placed themselves into the composition. Once he saw the final composition, he opened his eyes, switched the light on, and wrote the *lam-elif*s in the right place in the composition. The morning he realised that that was a perfect composition, that the *lam-elif*s were at their right place; and he was finally satisfied.[76]

The intricate calligraphic mirrored composition in *celî sülüs* at the entrance of the Şişli Camii in Istanbul (Figure 4.5) is one of the best and more complex artistic

[74] When joined together, the Arabic letters *Lām* (ل) and ʾ*Alif* (ا) generate the negative particle *Lā* (لا).
[75] This concept may be translated as submission, surrender, and resignation. The action or state of acceptance of a superior force or authority, where the will of the acceptant is open to be a receptacle of the will of God.
[76] Başar 45:08.

creations made by Hamid Aytaç.[77] It is reminiscent of the earliest symmetrical composition fashioned by Alī bin Yahyā al-Ṣūfī in 1478, which can be seen at the Imperial Gate of the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul.[78] Aytaç's composition depicts the verse 'Only they shall maintain the mosques of God who believe in God and the Last Day, perform the prayer and give the alms, and fear none but God. Such as these may be among the rightly guided' (Q. 9:18).

Figure 4.5 *Hamid Aytaç: calligraphic mirrored composition of the verse Q. 9:18 on the exterior muqarnas of the Şişli Camii in Istanbul, 1949.*

The composition is of great complexity, and it challenges the calligrapher in deciding how to create a perfect balance of forms in the attempt of mirroring the entire verse. At the very centre of the composition we can see the two symmetrical letters *lam-elifs* reflecting each other, and perceived in the dream by Hamid Aytaç as pulsating radiating light. This is another example that shows how the spiritual life of calligraphers deeply influences their artistic productions and how their spiritual understandings and experiences are interwoven with their creative processes.

[77] Alparslan, *Osmanlı hat sanatı tarihi*, 101.
[78] Tüfekçioğlu, 'Symmetrical Compositions in Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Architectural Inscriptions in Asia Minor', 454–55, fig. 26.1.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated in this chapter the relevance of the body in the practice of the art, considered holistically as a complex entity having interrelated physical, psychological, cultural, and oneiric dimensions.

The terrestrial or physical body of the calligrapher has been considered as the *habitual body*, or the outcome of the influence between the individual and the society in which the individual lives, assimilating layers of patterns, gestures, postures and manners, all bodily expressed by other human beings. In the case of the art of penmanship, central is the influence operated by the master to the disciple. The student of calligraphy assimilates bodily manners and movements, sometimes without openly acknowledging this process of assimilation. I considered the importance of the physical body in calligraphy under three aspects: (i) calligraphy as an act of embodiment; (ii) calligraphy as physical struggle, control and empowerment; (iii) calligraphy as *adab*, or proper manners.

The art of penmanship can be considered as an act of embodiment of the Divine Word. The calligrapher is fully committed to memorise the verses of the Quran, practicing them over and over again. The constant calligraphic exercise leads a calligrapher to absorb, and in that sense to embody, within the muscles and the brain, the holy verses, which will be written for a life time. In calligraphers' perception, this embodiment is related also to the importance of understanding and manifesting the contents of those utterances in their lives, reflecting and embodying the teachings of their religion. A calligrapher should also be able, as in music, to transfer feelings and emotions to his or her artistic endeavours.

The body of the calligrapher undergoes a vigorous training, described as a struggle, during which muscles, eyes, and hands are exercised to perfectly suit the requirements of the art. I demonstrated how elements such as a correct posture, concentration, the capacity to maintain the same bodily position for a long time, the correct breathing process, and muscular memory, together with the strengthening of hands and eyes, are all involved in the execution of the art. I also discussed some similarities between calligraphy and the art of archery, praised in Islam and in Ottoman culture, discipline practiced by some renowned calligraphers.

The cultural dimension of the control of the body has been discussed taking into account the concept of *adab*, a complex cultural concept translatable as good manners, courtesy, decency and respect. I demonstrated how some calligraphers understand their art as involving the way they behave and interact with other people, the way they move their bodies, the way they communicate, and the way they govern their emotions. Calligraphy has been described as an outcome of Islamic civilisation, a manifestation of a whole and complete life style.

I subsequently analysed the correlation between healing and art, reporting a few cases emerged in the interviews in which physical or mental distress have been described to disappear when practicing calligraphy. I witnessed a very positive atmosphere of mutual respect and encouragement among practitioners of the art in the classes I have observed, where moments of seriousness, silence and complete concentration, were alternated with moments of relaxation and enjoyment, creating a healthy social environment. Calligraphy can be used also as a token of affection, with the intention of soothing the tired spirit of a friend, as in the case of an episode illustrated by Mehmed Özçay.

Finally, I reported the relevance of dreams narrated to me by Fuat Başar, Hasan Çelebi and Hilal Kazan. I showed how dreams and visions are relevant aspects of the Islamic religion, Ottoman culture, and the Turkish contemporary calligraphic tradition. The recurrent aspects of dreams among calligraphy practitioners are the appearances of Ottoman or contemporary renowned masters who teach the art, encourage or give counsels about how to execute better calligraphic pieces. In some cases, thanks to dreams calligraphers were able to find ways to finalise the work in which they were stuck. The exponents of the traditional stream of calligraphy portray the tradition as unfolding through centuries not only as an outcome of hard technical work, but also as having a spiritual dimension, manifested in dreams and visions.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE PATH

In this chapter I will explore the ethical dimension of calligraphy, conceived as a spiritual path, which requires the development of human and moral virtues and qualities, alongside the technical ones. I have been inspired to use the term 'path' (*yol*) since most of the calligraphers referred to their art as an endless pathway of continuous technical and moral improvement, as it will be demonstrated.

The path of calligraphy needs to be led by a guide, the master, who accompanies and directs the wayfarer in the development of qualities which strengthen, empower and perfect the individual self. A calligrapher is usually guided by one master on the path, but it is common to study different calligraphic styles with different masters, with the aim of perfecting diverse aspects of the art.

The qualities developed through calligraphic practice are not only focused on the self, such as patience, serenity and contentment, but they also involve an expansion of the self towards others, and towards the ultimately other, that is, the Divine. The relationship with other human beings is characterised in terms of sincerity, dignity and respect, showed especially towards those who already walked the path and they helped other wayfarers on the artistic and existential journey. The relationship with the Divine is characterised by a sense of intimate connection with the Creator, entailing the willingness to offer the art for His sake, to augment and perfect belief and religious knowledge, to rely completely on Him, to be open to His inspiration, to reflect and meditate on His words, to be aware of the ever-approaching end of the physical journey, that is, death.

When the master considers the student mature enough in the art, he or she can grant to him or her the *ijāza*, the license to teach the art and to sign the calligraphic works. The *ijāza* functions as a formal, prestigious and authoritative introduction of the calligrapher within the larger community of calligraphers, and as a confirmation that the student has become a master indeed, bearing the responsibility to teach and propagate the art. Nevertheless, the attainment of the *ijāza* does not represent the end

of the journey. It rather represents the realisation of it, at a new level of maturity, knowledge, commitment and responsibility. The calligrapher has to walk the same path over and over again, continuing to nurture the qualities which allowed him or her to obtain the mastery of the art in one or more calligraphic styles, usually studied with one main master and perfected through the guidance of different masters in different styles. Thus, this chapter can be conceived in a circular, or better to say, in a spiral, way. The path, and whatever it has required to cultivate, does not terminate with the license, rather it begins again with its achievement.

The image of the path is used often within the broader Islamic context. It is, first of all, resonant with the image of the Straight Path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) found in the opening sura of the Quran: 'Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray' (Q. 1:6-7). The Straight Path can denote a middle way between the extremes of worldliness and asceticism, legalism and esotericism, and indicates the servitude of the outward human nature and the freedom of the inner human nature.[1] The image of the path has been often used in the sermons attributed to ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib, where the existential human experience has been equated with a journey in which the path symbolises Islam, its duties, and the performance of good deeds, 'sins are the burden that slows you down. Repentance lightens this load. The progression of human life in this world is as a camel caravan. The driver of the caravan is death. And the destination is heaven.'[2] The metaphor of the path is central in Sufism too.[3] The wayfarer (*sālik*) traverses several stations and stages, sometimes described as dangerous and wonderful valleys, during which he or she experiences a process of purification, transformation, refinement and illumination of the soul, alongside the development of moral and spiritual qualities, some of which – such as gratitude, contentment, patience, complete trust in God, and serenity – have been discussed in

[1] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 9.
[2] Tahera Qutbuddin, 'The Sermons of ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia', *Anuario De Estudios Medievales* 42, no. 1 (2012): 210.
[3] J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 140.

depth in Sufi literature and are perceived by calligraphers to be vital to the calligraphic path too, as it will be demonstrated.[4]

As an introductory summary of the topics which will be presented in depth in the following pages, I present the poignant reflections of Fatih Özkafa in reference to the qualities necessary to traverse the calligraphic path:

> You need to study quite a lot, and to be concentrated, to get the fruits of your labour. Other essential conditions to be a good calligrapher are silence, calmness, and serenity. You also need to scrutinise the artwork of your predecessors, the old (*eski*) calligraphers. ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib says that calligraphy is hidden in the master's training, and to achieve your goal in this path (*yol*), you need to practice a lot. You also need to be persistent in the religion of Islam.[5]

The tradition attributed to ʿAlī, and paraphrased above by Özkafa, is a well-known tradition among calligraphers, and it has been reported to me in other instances during my fieldwork, often in the original Arabic, which I translated as '[the art of] calligraphy is hidden in the teaching/knowledge of the master, and its strength/foundation is in the frequent practice, and its constancy is in the religion of Islam.'[6] This tradition is also portrayed in Ottoman calligraphic albums, an element which further explains its appreciation among calligraphers.[7] Efdaluddin Kılıç, in his personal website, presented the three secrets of the 'divine art' of calligraphy, reporting and interpreting the tradition attributed to ʿAlī. According to him the three secrets are the following: 'the first one being [hidden] in the hand of a master, the second one in making practice following the master's instructions, and the last one in living a righteous life as a good Muslim.'[8] The reflections presented by Özkafa and the tradition interpreted by some calligraphers, including Kılıç, encapsulate several

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[4] See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 109–30; Alexander D Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 301–9.
[5] Özkafa 16:42.
[6] In the original Arabic: الخط مخفي في تعليم الأستاذ وقوامه في كثرة المشق، ودوامه على دين الإسلام Notwithstanding the fact that these words are well-known among calligraphers, I was not able to locate the source and the chain of transmission of this tradition attributed to ʿAlī.
[7] Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 26.
[8] 'Karalama (The Blackening)', *Efdaluddin Kılıç*, accessed 15 August 2017, http: //www.efdaluddin.com/component/option,com_easygallery/act,photos/cid,3/Itemid,30/index.html.

aspects which will be unveiled in this chapter, in which I will first focus my analysis on disclosing the nature of the relationship which binds together master and disciple; secondly, I will elaborate on the development of human, ethical and spiritual qualities perceived by calligraphers to be necessary in walking the calligraphic path; finally I will describe what the *ijāza* is, and what its achievement entails in the perception of calligraphers.

5.1 The Relationship with the Master

The aim of this section is to uncover the nature of the relationship that binds together master and disciple of the art of penmanship. I will fist present the importance of the lineage in the transmission of the art, which proceeds in interrupted chains from the originator of the art until contemporary practitioners. The nature of the master-disciple relationship has been described in terms of love, gratefulness, and respect. I have perceived a high degree of emotional attachment when calligraphers remembered their masters during the interviews. The guidance of the master, in terms of ethical and spiritual development, is manifested primarily through his or her example, rather than through verbal teaching, which is limited to rare moments of direct moral and spiritual instruction, and to collective gatherings aimed to the transmission of stories and anecdotes.

The guidance of a master (*hoca* in Turkish) is a *conditio sine qua non* of the traditional calligraphic path, as clearly attested by Hüseyin Öksüz: 'The method of the art of calligraphy has to be learnt from a master. You cannot learn this art without having a master.'[9] The structure which binds together master and disciple in lines of authoritative transmission through centuries, is parallel to the Sufi structure of transmission of knowledge, which connects master and disciples in a chain (*silsila*) of transmission that usually goes back not only to the founder of a Sufi school or path (*ṭarīqa*), but also to figures of the dawning era of Islam, as Prophet Muhammad and ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib.[10] Therefore, it is not surprising that ʿAlī is perceived as the

[9] Öksüz 03:00.
[10] Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 11–16; Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, 175.

initiator of calligraphy as well. This structure is similar also to the transmission of traditional religious Islamic sciences.[11] In the section about the *ijāza* I will illustrate in detail the concept of the *silsila* in calligraphy, which connects calligraphers back to Şeyh Hamdullah, originator of the Turkish traditional calligraphic stream. Öksüz also uncovered the nature of the relationship binding master and pupil together, using Sufi terminology:

> The master and the student must get along well and love each other like father and son. Loving your master, being talented and committing yourself to the art, these are the basic conditions for learning calligraphy. There should be a bond of love between master and student, like a *şeyh* and a *mürid*.[12]

The terms *şeyh* and *mürid* are the Turkish equivalent for the Arabic words *shaykh* and *murīd*, which in Sufism identify the master and the disciple, literally the one 'who has made up his will [to enter the Path].'[13] The function of the master is to initiate the disciple to the mystical teachings, methods and techniques, comparable to the calligraphic ones, but also to submit the disciple to hardships and tests, in order to mature him or her and to strengthening him or her in walking the Path.[14] It will be shown below similar methods and approaches in the way calligraphy masters guide their pupils on the calligraphic path. It is not surprising that Öksüz defined the relationship between master and disciple as a relationship of love: in Turkish culture the archetype of a Sufi master-disciple relationship is the one between Rūmī and his master Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī (1185–1248), characterised by deep love and spiritual intimacy in their journey of unveiling (*kashf*) of Divine Mysteries and attainment of Divine Unification.[15]

The Depeler brothers used in reference to their master the same Sufi terminology. Moreover, they manifested, through their attitudes and words, extreme

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[11] Simonowitz, 'A Modern Master of Islamic Calligraphy and Her Peers', 78.
[12] Öksüz 3:55.
[13] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 100.
[14] Schimmel, 101.
[15] Franklin D Lewis, *Rumi - Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalâl Al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 162–71.

gratitude and respect for their master: 'Our master Hüseyin Öksüz is like our *şeyh*, we owe everything to him.'[16] In Sufi ethics, the gratitude expressed by the *mürid* towards the *şeyh* resonates with the degree of deference and gratefulness that I have attested, in all the interviews that I have conducted, when calligraphers talked about their masters.[17] The Depeler brothers added that 'the master-student relationship lasts forever, until death.'[18] Similarly, Tyriaki affirmed that 'students of calligraphy should be trained in the traditional techniques, and this traditional training must be intense. Thanks to its intensity, students maintain their relationship with their master. In that sense being a student will never end.'[19] The hard training, though, is not the only reason behind the existence of a strong bond between master and disciple. There is also a strong element of emotional attachment: 'speaking of my master Hamid, I am trying not to cry now. These are tears of longing. I wish he could have lived longer to see his students and all what they have been achieving' confessed Öksüz to me, manifestly moved by the memory of his master Hamid Aytaç.[20] In fact, the relationship between master and disciple has been described by Kutlu as a soul-to-soul, or heart-to-heart, relationship:

> In this culture the relationship between people is not based on eyes-to-eyes, but on soul-to-soul, therefore this has to be grasped first, and then it will be possible to understand calligraphy. We call this soul-to-soul relationship fluidity (*feyz*). It is like a blue-tooth device in modern technology, with which you can transfer every document without seeing it with your eyes.[21]

The Turkish term *feyz* comes from the Arabic *fayḍ*, a technical term used in Islamic Neo-Platonic philosophy, referring to the process of emanation of several

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[16] Depeler brothers 13:49.
[17] On the concept of gratitude in Sufism, in relation to other human beings, see Atif Khalil, 'The Embodiment of Gratitude (Shukr) in Sufi Ethics', *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016): 171.
[18] Depeler brothers 16:19.
[19] Tiryaki 38:41.
[20] Öksüz I 28:50.
[21] Kutlu 00:58.

metaphysical dimensions from the One.[22] In common language it refers to the ideas of flood, superabundance, copiousness, flux.[23] In the context of a Sufi master-disciple relationship, it refers to the spiritual connection between the two, where the blessings of the master flow copious towards his disciple, granting protection, power, and spiritual awakening.[24] A part from Kutlu, only Kazan mentioned this concept in reference to her master.[25]

Kutlu, providing stories through which he wanted to frame calligraphy within the broader context of Islamic civilisation, narrated an episode of the life of the Ottoman calligrapher Mehmed Şevkî Efendi (1829–1887), who, when young, refused to study under the care of the greatest calligrapher of his time, Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876), because he did not want to leave his master, the humble Hulûsi Efendi (d. 1874). This story demonstrates the degree of respect, love and attachment which binds together master and disciple:

> When the calligrapher Şevkî Efendi was six years old, his uncle Hulûsi Efendi put him on a donkey with some food, and they both moved to Istanbul. The calligrapher Hulûs Efendi was the imam of Ali Pasha mosque where I also did my prayers for twenty-four years when I was an imam there, and everybody was saying: 'what this man is doing as a philosopher and as an imam?' So, Hulûsi Efendi raised Şevkî Efendi and he taught him the art of calligraphy. The last one was artistically brilliant. The uncle said to his nephew: 'you are very talented, do not sacrifice yourself staying with me. Let me write a letter to Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi who is an excellent calligrapher, and you will improve a lot with him'. This happened when Şevkî Efendi was twelve years old. Şevkî Efendi said to his uncle: 'I do not want to be disgraceful, I want to stay here because I am grateful to you. Whatever you want me to learn, please let me be here, I want you as my master'. Here you can see a perfect example of what being a student and being a teacher means. The teacher does not say to the student: 'I am the greatest; please do not go to someone else' [*laughs*].

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[22] Massimo Campanini, *An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 94–99.
[23] Hans Wehr and Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 861.
[24] Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 26, 149.
[25] Kazan 13:57.

> The student does not say: 'my training is worthless; I am going somewhere else to learn'. At the end Şevkî Efendi became even more famous than Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi.[26]

It is interesting to note how calligraphers interweave stories form the Ottoman past with their daily life experience in Istanbul. For instance, Kutlu recollected that he was the imam of Ali Pasha mosque, where also Hulûsi Efendi carried out the same role, or Fuat Başar, in chapter two, section three, narrated the story of a calligrapher buried just in front of his studio. The Ottoman heritage is considered to reverberate in the present, echoing stories, anecdotes and moral teachings perceived to be valuable and precious. From the above story a humble disposition can be detected both in the disciple and in the master. Şevkî Efendi, in particular, demonstrated gratitude to his master, to the extent that he refused the seduction of being trained by the most famous calligrapher of his time. However, his degree of humility and attachment to his master did not prevent him to surpass in influence and artistic mastery Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi.[27] This degree of deference and respect, as I already pointed out, is still detectable within the contemporary tradition.

The strong bond between master and disciple has emerged also in the words of Hilal Kazan, who offered a very intimate account of the relationship with her master Hasan Çelebi, a relationship which can be described as all-encompassing:

> I have learnt many things from my master (*hoca*). I am sure there is a special connection between *hoca* and me, if not, I could not have written a book about him.[28] I spent a lot of time with him. I always listen to him, I listen to him, and I listen to him. I recorded him, and I was then listening again to what he said at home. Then I started to write the book about him. I do not know what word is suitable to describe our relationship. I do not know. Sometimes he is a very close friend; sometimes he is like a father, and I am like his daughter. Sometimes he is a lover. Please do not misunderstand me. For example, when I understand something

[26] Kutlu 01:01:51. For a historical report of the story narrated by Kutlu, see Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 124.
[27] Derman, 124.
[28] Kazan, *Noktalar ve Çizgiler Arasında Hasan Çelebi*.

> important or when I find something interesting, I immediately want to call him. Of course, he has a life on his own, but sometimes I need him, I feel the necessity to talk to him. All the feelings I have towards him are spiritual.[29]

She also described her master as an example of spirituality and religiosity, in aspects such as the constancy in performing religious duties. She also unveiled some private aspects of his life and the way he deals with hardships with patience, setting a high example for his students:

> I think our master – and I am not exaggerating – is full of spirituality. His tie to religion, to Allah and to the Messenger of Islam, is so powerful in his life. He has a very developed sensitiveness to everything that is connected to religion. Another thing about his spirituality is how he observes the precepts of the Islamic religion. He is a believer. And Islam is his complete life-style. For example, last time he said to me 'You know Hilal, I remember that maybe only four of five times in my life I had lunch, or dinner, or breakfast without doing ablutions before.' I cannot understand how a person may be so strict in his religion. He is full of religion and belief. That is the power of his faith (*iman*). How can I explain his spirituality more than that? You always see positivity from his face, from his gestures, behaviour and attitudes. For example, his mentally disabled son, of more than four years old, sometimes is very aggressive, but *hoca* is always patient with him and never beats him. He is patient all of the times with him, no matter what he does. And sometimes his son stays in the car and does not want to get off. Sometimes *hoca* sits with him for hours. In the car. He does not push his kid to get off the car. He does not slap him. I am sure that his child is one of the tests of his life. I am sure. It is a life exam. He always shows patience to his child.[30]

From her words and the attitude that she has demonstrated while narrating the above account to me, I could perceive a deep and authentic sense of respect for her master,

[29] Kazan 28:01.
[30] Kazan 29:55.

considered as a living example and a source of inspiration not only in art, but also in religion, and in facing the hardships of life.[31]

The fact that the master assumes an exemplary role in students' lives is definitely an element that emerged several times in calligraphers' perspectives on the nature of the master-disciple relationship. It is interesting to note that when I asked to Fuat Başar if he received a spiritual training from his master, he replied that he learnt all what he needed to learn through his example and not through words, an idea analogous to Kutlu's conception of *feyz*, that is, a relationship based not on words but on a heart-to-heart connection. Başar was also moved remembering his master Hamid Aytaç; from his eyes I could see a similar sense of longing that I perceived in Öksüz's tears. Başar revealed to me how the character of his master affected him, and how the master taught him spirituality through his example:

> My master Hamid did not have to teach me with words how spirituality has to be practiced, because his mood and character would teach me all there was to be known. He was a lonely man. He faced hardships and challenges for all of his life. He afforded his life writing calligraphy. He was a very emotional man. When the name of Prophet Muhammad was uttered, he would cry. He was such a special and spiritual person, even in his dreams. I learnt from him through his example.[32]

Uğur Derman also reported to me that the master is an example to be followed by the disciple. The moral training takes place mostly without words, based on the absorption of good manners, morality and full commitment to the art exhibited by the master. Masters may also present some tests to pupils, in order to assess and verify their commitment, patience and determination:

> I have been trained in spirituality, but that did not happen with words. That happened through the behaviour, attitude, and moral example of my master. The

[31] In another instance Kazan referred to her master as a hero: 'the students get affected from the behaviour of our master, because he does never get angry. He does not shout at his students, and he is always calm. Therefore, they learn from his example. It is an educational process: they learn how to behave and how to become future masters. He is our hero! We want to become like him'. Çelebi (with Kazan) 01:16:24.
[32] Başar 45:08.

> more important qualities are morality and good manners (*terbiye*). You cannot expect that every calligraphy student would get those virtues. Sometimes they do not get any lesson in that field, sometimes only a few. In the Ottoman times, masters were questioning the morality of their students presenting some tests to them, in order to see if they were worthy enough of becoming students of calligraphy. For example, during the first few months, masters would consciously behave towards their students in a harsh and severe way. Most of calligraphers would train their students in their homes, and according to an established tradition, they would not ask for money from their pupils. Sometimes when a student reached the master's home, the master would say: 'I am not going to teach you today.' This could happen many times. If the student is not entirely dedicated and committed to this art, if he does not love to learn calligraphy, then he could give up and leave. If the student is dedicated to calligraphy, even if you kick him out, he will come back again and again. The master wants to see full commitment, love and determination, because the master is also dedicated to teach and to train students with full commitment.[33]

Therefore, the commitment showed by the master towards the art should instil in the student the willingness to demonstrate the same degree of dedication and diligence. However, commenting on the ways his masters Macit Ayral (1891–1961) and Halim Özyazıcı (1898–1964) taught the art, Derman revealed to me that they used a sweet attitude in teaching. As a master, Derman would sometimes cut the lessons of his students, only when they were not putting enough effort.[34]

Concerning the transmission of the virtues that will be discussed in the following section, Kılıç revealed that a direct moral teaching takes place very rarely, and only at the right time: 'the moral aspect may go along with the technical training, but every master has the right to pass on those precious teachings at the perfect moment. The moment when the student needs to hear the teaching, when the student is in a mood of understanding.'[35] Hence, the moral and spiritual knowledge is transmitted through the example of the master, and through rare instances of direct teaching. Furthermore, Hasan Çelebi affirmed that some special gatherings among

[33] Derman 06:29.
[34] Derman 13:00.
[35] Kılıç 26:20.

calligraphers can be organised with the specific aim of discussing and sharing cultural, moral, and spiritual elements related to the art. When I asked to him if he conveys to students also some spiritual or religious teachings, while teaching calligraphy, the following has been his reply:

> I usually teach the aesthetics and the technical aspects of calligraphy. Students coming over and over to my studio learn, of course, about the religious dimension. When students come to show me their pieces, we share glimpses, memories and jokes from the lives of past calligraphers like, for example, Hamid Aytaç and Kemal Batanay. During those conversations, called *sohbetler*, they are exposed for years to religious and spiritual teachings as well. Therefore, they learn many things, other than the technical aspects. But when I teach, I teach calligraphy.[36]

The *sohbetler* (conversations) constitute an institution in Turkish culture, influenced by the practice of ritualised social meetings in Sufism, and they are defined by Silverstein as 'companionship-in-conversation', whose aim is the ethical development of participants and the transmission of religious knowledge.[37] Correspondingly, in the world of Turkish calligraphy, the *sohbetler* can be described as social gatherings organised with the aim of socialising and sharing knowledge, stories, anecdotes, and poems on calligraphy, and on the masters of the past. Thus, the educational and moral process is articulated in three aspects: (i) the imitation of the master; (ii) extremely rare moments of direct teaching; (iii) collective gatherings whose aim is the ethical development through the transmission of knowledge, and of the cultural heritage of the art.

5.2 The Calligraphic Training and the Development of Virtues

The calligraphic training is in itself a source of ethical and spiritual empowerment. The calligrapher, as I have demonstrated, learn primarily from the example of the

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[36] Çelebi 01:14:55.
[37] Brian Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 26, 135.

master. Nevertheless, the training and the practice of the art contribute substantially to the development of qualities that will be discussed in this section.

My analysis will be based on the calligraphers' understanding of their art experience. First, I will focus the analysis on the development of the qualities of the self. Secondly, I will show how calligraphers relate to other people, such as the masters of the past, and how Turkish society interacts with calligraphers. Finally, I will discuss how calligraphers relate to the Divine.

5.2.1 Self-Cultivation in Relation to the Practice of the Art

In this sub-section I will elaborate on some of the most relevant qualities necessary to walk the calligraphic path. The following qualities emerged from the interviews I have conducted: (i) wanting to be changed and to accept the master's ways; (ii) patience; (iii) serenity; (iv) dedication and constancy; (v) concentration; (vi) relaxation, balance and moderation; (vii) peacefulness and contentment. Finally, some calligraphers described the calligraphic practice in ambivalent and contradicting terms, such as sweet as honey, or such as full of hardships.

Kılıç, commenting on the practice of writing repeatedly the prayer *Rabbi yessir*[38], before tracing dots and letters, affirmed that the spiritual dimension hidden behind that practice consists in pushing the aspirant calligrapher towards exhaustion, and towards the willingness to follow the ways of the master. Furthermore, he affirmed that while writing the prayer, over and over again, the student starts to change from within, recognising that every endeavour is only acceptable through the grace of the Divine:

> When you write *Rabbi yessir*, every time you bring it to your master, he refuses it back. He asks you to repeat it another time. And again. And again. You may feel that you are going on a hopeless way. You are not getting any success. No steps forward. But actually, you are learning a lot. During all of this – even if your master does not say anything to you – you are already changing inside, because of the meaning of the

[38] See chapter three, section three.

> prayer. You confess that real success comes from Allah. And you are actually expecting a kind of divine hand to touch your hand, so that you can write together. But this is also a kind of struggle between your way and the master's way. Because some people persist in making the same mistakes, but the master will never stop teaching you the other way, trying to change your way of doing it, sometimes very politely, sometimes maybe with a bit of anger. But before changing your hand in the way that *hoca* likes it, you will not be able to start with the letters. And your *nefs*, your ego, is in a situation where it is compelled to obey.[39]

The concept of the control of the self, required in the spiritual path for the reason that the ego is persistent in making mistakes, is a traditional Islamic idea. The Quran mentions three different stages of the soul: (i) *al-nafs al-ammāra* (Q. 12:53), the soul inciting towards evil, which is uneducated, full of passion, and has destructive and evil tendencies; (ii) *al-nafs al-lawwāma* (Q. 70:2), the blamed and blaming soul, that represents the stage in which the moral awareness is awake and struggles to control and guide the ego; (iii) *al-nafs al-muṭma'inna* (Q. 89:27), the tranquil soul, which has perfected and refined itself, and which reached a condition of intimate peace in the Divine Will.[40] Kılıç implicitly referred to the second stage: the master pushes the student to educate, train, and control his or her ego. In Sufism the battle against the ego assumes a paramount importance, often perceived as the beginning of the path. It has been equated with the process of polishing the mirror of the heart from the dust of evil, so that the Light of Divine Unity may shine in the intimate reality of the human being; a process which has been described in terms of struggle, great effort, and discipline.[41]

Kılıç affirmed that during the Ottoman times masters 'were not willing to give easily their precious knowledge to the hands of those who were not stable. They wanted to be sure that students really deserved it. A student must show respect and capacity.'[42] For that reason, Ottoman masters were testing the students in several and

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[39] Kılıç 27:24.
[40] See Alessandro Bausani, *Il Corano* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2003), 572.
[41] See, for instance, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, *The Secret of Secrets* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 54.
[42] Kılıç 30:03.

more severe ways, as also Derman attested above. Furthermore, in the Ottoman period calligraphy was completely integrated with the lives of people: gravestones, newspapers, walls, monuments, were all exhibiting calligraphic scripts or inscriptions. For that reason, masters could have more available students who were willing to study the art. Some of those students were also attracted by the prospective of earning money, fame and respect, something that the contemporary era does not offer easily to calligraphers.[43] Therefore, Kılıç recognised that contemporary masters are more encouraging with their students, especially at the beginning of the training, because people nowadays are less acquainted with the Arabic script, and less numerous are those who are willing to learn the art.[44] Nevertheless, masters still test their students at one point of their training. According to Kurlu, calligraphy requires patience, dedication, and constancy, and masters assess the presence of those qualities in their pupils, in order to see who will be worthy to progress in the art.[45]

The essential quality in the pursuit of the mastery of the art of penmanship is patience, a virtue which has been mentioned in all the interviews I have conducted, a virtue equated *tout court* with the art itself by Ayten Tiryaki: 'Patience (*sabır*) is equal to calligraphy. An impatient person cannot be considered in the art of calligraphy. If this person is impatient in life, at least he should become very patient for the sake of the art.'[46] After describing the physical training required in calligraphy, which I have analysed in chapter four, Savaş Çevik described the spiritual aspect necessary to walk the path of calligraphy, and which is hidden behind the physical training:

> To begin with, a calligrapher should definitely acknowledge that his life will change and, has been changed, irrecoverably. This art requires to be patient (*sabırlı*) and to spend a lot of time practicing. Calligraphers would start with writing the prayer *Rabbi yessir*. This is such a simple and beautiful prayer, but the important thing is

[43] Kılıç 30:15.
[44] Kılıç 4:07.
[45] Kurlu 09:15.
[46] Tiryaki 24:22.

> that masters want to test the patience of students. Those who are not patient enough will give up and leave.[47]

The phase during which a student is asked to write *Rabbi yessir* has been described by Çevik as a test for the aspirant calligrapher. Only those who are able to demonstrate patience, a quality which will be required for the rest of the calligrapher's life, will persevere in the art. Elaborating more on the meaning of the aforementioned quality, Çevik affirmed that

> Patience is a fundamental human quality, so important that it could solve any problem in the world, even between different countries. Because when you have a problem, when you face hardship, the more you are impatient in reacting, the more unsolid results you get. There is no place for being lazy in calligraphy, but being patient is not only enough, being patient with being patient is important. With patience, perseverance and endurance, you will reach maturity in the art.[48]

The expression 'being patient with being patient' required to me some time of reflection and conceptual unpacking. In the moment when he proffered those words, I have not taken the chance to ask him to explain what he meant. A possible interpretation, especially considering that he mentioned perseverance and endurance, is that being in a state of passivity is not enough. The aspirant calligrapher should constantly and actively manifest that quality, with no interruption in the flow of his or her willingness and determination. A state of passivity would easily lead to stagnation and demotivation. 'Being patient with being patient' suggests that the calligrapher never ceases to manifest the quality of patience, and never exhausts the energies required to persevere on the path, totally embracing, accepting and not opposing the transformative process that the art requires.

Hilal Kazan offered honest self-reflections, not only on the centrality of patience, but also on bettering herself through the practice of the art, and on the spiritual attitude she matured in her life:

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[47] Çevik 12:29.
[48] Çevik 24:32.

> Calligraphy changed me. I was an impatient person. Now I am patient and I rely on Allah all the time (*tevekkül*). My knowledge is from Allah. I accept with patience bad and good things in life. I became tolerant with other people if they misbehave towards me. I try to understand everyone, and I try to imitate my master. He is my model of conduct. Maybe I am not a good calligrapher, but I have tried to change my bad manners, and to become a better person.[49]

Kazan values the transformation produced in her by the art to the extent that even if she may not be described as a good calligrapher, she is satisfied with the fact that walking the calligraphic path bettered herself as a human being. Sufi literature, in particular, discussed the qualities evoked by Kazan of being patient in afflictions and under any condition.[50]

Hasan Çelebi highlighted another important quality on the path of the art of penmanship, that is, serenity: 'Calligraphy requires peace (*barış*) and tranquillity (*huzur*). Since the art of calligraphy is rooted in Islam and in its spirit, tranquillity is required. When we are satisfied with the works we are doing, we gain even more tranquillity.'[51] He restated four times the word *huzur* – which can be translated as peace, tranquillity, or serenity – saying it clearly, slowly, firmly, moving his head up and down every-time he repeated it. He transmitted with his body language what I gathered to be the keys of success in the art: quietness and constancy.

Çelebi asserted also the importance of full dedication and concentration: 'To become an excellent calligrapher, one should work with full concentration at least thirty hours a day. One should not be distracted by anything else. It requires a lot of effort, dedication, constancy and concentration. Sometimes you even forget yourself, and all the people around you.'[52] The intensity of one's dedication should be thus totally absorbing, to the extent of entering into a creative space where everything else but the art is forgotten.

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[49] Kazan 36:04.
[50] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 124.
[51] Çelebi 23:39.
[52] Çelebi 00:53.

Further elaborating on the quality of concentration, Çelebi pointed to the importance not only of the present moment, where the calligrapher is absorbed in the creative work with full attention, but also of the future, in the sense that his full concentration on letters will maybe inspire future artists: 'When I write I think about one thing only. I want the letters to transmit the knowledge and experience I gathered. Maybe one hundred years in the future a great artist will be inspired by them, and I do not want him to see the mistakes that I have done.'[53]

Fuat Başar interestingly mentioned other details on the role of concentration in the creative calligraphic process, drawing also from stories related to one of the masters of Hamid Aytaç, and to one of his students:

> Different elements are important to be mentioned in relation to concentration. Students should be concentrated before performing calligraphy. They should see beforehand in their minds what they are going to do and compose. They should have everything in mind through concentration and then, putting aside ideas about their belongings, or the products of their actions, they should start to practice the art. Once they finish their work, they should straightaway take those works away from their eyes. They should detach from their works. The reason behind keeping distance from what you have done is that if you look at your work one or two days after creating it, you have the detachment necessary to judge and to see the mistakes you have done. This is something that not every person can do. Calligraphers perform in the first instance with a black pencil on a piece of paper, and then only at the end with the *kalem*. We may not like the first composition, we may want to change it several times. One of Hamid Bey's masters was Kâmil Efendi – the chief-master of all calligraphers (*reisü'l-hattâtîn*).[54] The chief of calligraphers in the Ottoman Empire would practice just one piece sometimes more than one thousand times. There are still people following this way of exercising and improving. But one of the students of Hamid Aytaç, Halim Özyazıcı[55], would see a Quranic verse, and he would understand it and see it in his mind – knowing how to compose it, knowing what pen to use – before actually writing the verse. This is another way other than

[53] Çelebi 25:42.
[54] Ahmed Kâmal Akdik (1861–1941). See chapter one, section two.
[55] Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı (1898–1964). See chapter one, section two.

> exercising several times. He did not need to fix anything. He just needed the ink, the pen, all the tools, and then it was done. He already had everything in his mind. There are two ways. One is trying hard and continuing to practice; the second one is having a unique concentration and clarity, so that to achieve the same result.[56]

In the first half of this complex passage, Başar introduced how concentration works during the creative process, mentioning that calligraphers should be able to keep in their minds, with clarity and detachment from anything else, the idea of the composition they want to create, before writing. He also suggested that in order to spot mistakes, it is preferable to return to the composition only some days after its creation, in order to achieve some emotional distance from it. In the second half of the passage he introduced two ways of exercising and practicing the art, using two calligraphers differently related to Hamid Aytaç, as opposed examples, but leading to the same results: (i) practicing a calligraphic piece with black pencil on a piece of paper numerous times until perfection, satisfaction and clarity have been achieved; (ii) visualising with extreme clarity the composition within the mind, and with extreme concentration, directly writing the final piece. The two practices resonate with the visual (*nāẓirī*) practice and the practice by the pen (*qalamī*) that are mentioned in Persian calligraphic treatises.[57]

Fatih Özkafa offered some fascinating insights on the mental state he finds himself into when he writes calligraphy, and also on the qualities he cultivated while walking the calligraphic path, such as relaxation, balance and moderation, both in life and in the art:

> When I start to write, everything in my mind that is unrelated to calligraphy disappears. I feel completely relaxed, concentrated and centred. This art is so appealing to senses that any exaggeration looks awful on the works that we are writing. Just like our lives. Both of our calligraphic works and lives should be balanced, not involved with any exaggeration. Calligraphy teaches you to have moderation and balance in everything in your life, and not to be intemperate. If your

[56] Başar 01:23:22.
[57] Roxburgh, 'The Eye Is Favoured', 281.

> spirit is strong, your calligraphy is strong. If your spirit is weak, your calligraphy is weak. Your life goes into calligraphy.[58]

Similarly, several calligraphers have mentioned to me, during our private conversations, how they often felt a sense of peacefulness and contentment while performing the art, a feeling epitomised by the words of the Depeler brothers: 'When we write, we always have the feeling that we are doing something good. We usually feel content and deeply peaceful when we practice calligraphy.'[59]

Finally, the calligraphic practice has been described as sweet as honey by Kutlu[60] or as a complex and difficult process by Kazan. According to her, moments of restlessness alternate with moments of blissful writing, when the ego is forgotten and liquefied in the sea of calligraphy:

> When I am relaxed my writing is very good, but sometimes when I want to create something, I cannot cut the letters nicely and sharply, because of psychological stress. Sometimes, I lose myself in calligraphy. I feel that my ego disappears while I am writing, and I lose my sense of time. But sometimes, I cannot even sit quietly on my chair: I get up, and I go to the kitchen, I clean something, I drink coffee, I iron… I just cannot sit. I think that this is my artistic way of being. Sometimes I have paper and pens ready on my desk, but I always find something else to do. But sometimes my desk is ready, I get up, I perform my ablutions – I do not know how and why – I sit down and I immediately start to work without having any stress or tension in my body and mind. And that is when my writing is beautiful. Something spiritual happens. I prepare myself one or two days before writing. After that, everything flows naturally. Maybe if I wrote more regularly I would not need that period of

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[58] Özkafa 44.20.
[59] Depeler brothers 21.38.
[60] 'Calligraphy is like tasting honey. If somebody would ask you what you feel while eating honey, you would answer: 'sweetness'. Just like in the metaphor of honey, I cannot express my experience and feelings. The only thing I can do is to put a little bit of honey in your mouth, so that you would understand that sweetness. As I said before the training is not about eye, hand, brain, but it is about the soul. This is not something you could understand without experiencing it and practicing (*meşk*). It is about *meşk*. *Meşk*!' Kutlu 39:25.

> preparation, I do not know. Anyway, I am aware that also other calligraphers have similar difficulties like mine.[61]

Kazan's experience shows how the attainment of a state of spiritual detachment can be hard to achieve. Sometimes, restlessness and psychological stress may be elements of the calligraphic practice. Sometimes, a calligrapher may attain a state of peaceful detachment from the ego, evoked by Kazan, Çelebi, Kutlu and Özkafa in the previous pages, when the writing flows like water from the calligrapher's pen.[62]

5.2.2 The Relationship with other Human Beings

The art does not only require the development of some qualities for the betterment of the self, but it also influences the way artists interact with other human beings, and how society interacts with calligraphers. This relationship, compiling the elements emerged from interviews, can be characterised by a sense of morality, respect and sincerity, nobility and dignity. Öksüz summarised the characteristics of the calligraphic training presented so far, and introduced to me the idea of calligraphy as a moral path:

> Calligraphy is my first love. This art completely changes one's heart, soul, cast of mind, and way of life. Among calligraphers, you do not see even one who has committed a crime. You cannot see thieves or murderers; calligraphers do not fight all the time. The art of calligraphy would provide to a student patience, carefulness, and concentration. These are some good characteristics that a calligraphy student should have. Calligraphy students learn them without even noticing, and the master teaches those qualities with his example.[63]

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[61] Kazan 43:44.
[62] Metaphor taken from a poem penned by the Persian calligrapher Mīrzā Ghulām Riḍā Iṣfahānī (1829–1886). See Bahram Bayani, 'The Aesthetics of the Calligraphic Works of Mirza Gholamreza Isfahani', *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2015): 606.
[63] Öksüz I 11.55.

Öksüz's statement about the fact that no calligrapher ever committed crime, murder or robbery appears to me too bold. Nevertheless, it should be noted that calligraphers are definitely not known for committing those acts, and that sentiment may be explained by the fact that they strive to lead an ethical life following the Islamic moral path. Moreover, Öksüz added that 'people in the field of calligraphy, are usually not tyrants or bigots, but are polite (*terbiyeli*), tolerant (*hoşgörülü*) and benevolent (*sevecen*).'[64]

Kılıç offered an original point of view on patience, seen by him as a consequence of respect, which he considered as the most important quality to be acquired. His view fundamentally consists in highlighting the importance of sincerity and respect towards God, the Quran, Islamic teachings, the master, all the calligraphers of the past and all their artistic creations:

> Many people think that this path is based on patience (*sabır*), which is not what I believe. Maybe you will find out that I am the only one thinking in that way. I am not refuting patience, but actually why patience is relevant? So, my theory is that calligraphy is based on respect and sincerity, not on patience. Because if you have respect, then you have patience. We have patience for the sake of what? Calligraphy is a battle against your ego. The master forces you to write and behave in the way he likes. And you show respect, then you show patience. Do you show that patience only until you get the *ijāza*? What happens next? When you get the *ijāza* will you abandon your master? So, calligraphy is not based on patience. It is respect. If you are a respectful person, then you respect Allah, you respect what He revealed, you respect His Prophet, you respect the Quran and all its words and meanings, you respect all the masters of the past, and you respect the precious treasure of letters, forms and compositions left by them. If you show this respect, then for the sake of the greatness that you admire, you become patient, you put yourself into a mood of asking and begging. You are there just like a dervish.[65]

[64] Öksüz I 28:50.
[65] Kılıç 01:04:38.

It is clear that according to Kılıç respect should always be manifested to the master, not only until the achievement of the *ijāza*. The last metaphor that he presented, that is, the calligrapher as a dervish beginning and asking for more, is particularly powerful, since it conveys the degree of humility required in the pursuit of calligraphic knowledge, which can be triggered only when the calligrapher sincerely admires and respects the art, its tradition and its exponents.

Respect does not only flow from the calligrapher towards other human beings, but also from society towards the calligrapher. The Depeler brothers declared: 'We are quite young, but we are respected by people. People value calligraphy a lot, because it is an art related to the Quran.'[66] Kurlu mentioned also nobility and dignity, qualities he felt that have been bestowed upon him through the practice of the art:

> This art belongs to Islam and to the Quran, therefore if you are busy with calligraphy, it will give you dignity (*rıfat*) and honour (*şeref*). It is highly valued and regarded by Muslims. As an example, I was born in a very small and humble village on the Black Sea in Turkey, and I was raised there, but three days ago I was invited to Istanbul for a reception with the President, and this was not a unique event. Being in touch with important people is part of my life now. Sometimes I am invited by politicians, sometimes I am invited abroad to be the judge and ambassador of this art. This art is something precious, it gives you dignity.[67]

The aforementioned dignity and respect have been clearly explained in terms of the connection between art and religion. As Simonowitz pointed out, an epitaph on a nineteenth-century tombstone in Istanbul mentions that the departed soul was 'the son of the son of someone who was the nephew of a calligrapher' demonstrating how calligraphers were respected and honoured.[68] Modern Turkey developed a different attitude towards the art, as it has been demonstrated in chapter one, an art that was completely disappearing during the early years of the Republic. Today, calligraphers

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[66] Depeler brothers 11:38.
[67] Kurlu 19:26.
[68] Simonowitz, 'A Modern Master of Islamic Calligraphy and Her Peers', 85.

are regarded with high dignity and recognition especially by the religious, rather than the secular, segments of Turkish society.[69] When I asked to Çelebi what the role of a calligrapher is in Turkish society, he replied that 'it depends on what you think a calligrapher should be, and it depends on the character of the person. Some may want to become famous and rich. Others want to become dervishes of calligraphy. And if you are a dervish, you only serve calligraphy. Some may want to become both.'[70]

5.2.3 From the Self to the Universal Self: the Relationship with the Divine

From the development of virtues related to self-improvement, the analysis moved to the relationship between calligraphers and Turkish society. In this section the analysis will be expanded to include the relationship with the Divine. It will be explored how calligraphers interface themselves with aspects related to belief, such as being aware of the Divine Presence, doing everything for God's sake, rely on God, be inspired by Him, reflecting and meditating on His words, reaching tranquillity in the awareness of our final destination, that is, death. The next chapter will be focused entirely on the investigation of calligraphy as a way of remembering and worshipping God.

Kurlu mentioned the quality of *iḥsān*, which has been mentioned indirectly in the Quran in the expression *al-muḥsinūn* (those who do well, or the virtuous), for instance, in Q. 2:195 (And spend in the way of God and do not, with your own hands, cast yourselves into ruin. And be virtuous. Truly God loves the virtuous). In Sufism *iḥsān* denotes the practice and the interiorisation of good deeds in the act of awareness of the all-embracing Divine Presence.[71] According to Kurlu's understanding: 'Even if we are alone on our own, I believe Allah sees us; therefore, I am careful about what I am doing in front of Him.'[72]

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[69] See Edhem Eldem, 'Writing Less, Saying More: Calligraphy and Modernisation in the Last Ottoman Century', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 465–83.
[70] Çelebi 01:17:40.
[71] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 29.
[72] Kurlu 00:23.

Related to the awareness of the Divine Presence, is Kılıç's advice on doing everything for God's sake, overcoming feelings and desires of rewards and appreciation:

> When you finish a work, you feel a sense of relaxation and a kind of happiness that you have reached one of your goals, but sometimes expecting an appreciation may put you in trouble. Because for the sake of appreciation, you may be doing something ordinary, something not worthy. There is a general rule: to do things for the sake of Allah. In Turkish we say *Allah rızası için* (for God's sake). If you keep up with that understanding, in anything you do in your whole life, everything becomes better and acceptable. You have to empty your heart from expectation, and to do everything for the love of Allah. Then fame will come, money will come too.[73]

According to Kılıç's views, Divine love should lead the actions of men, and not the desire of being valued and cherished. In particular, the outcome of a calligraphic act depends on the abandonment of expectations, and on the offering of the fruits of the artistic labour to the Divine.

Doing everything for God's sake implies abandonment and self-surrender to the Divine All-Embracing Reality, that is, the quality of *tevekkül* (reliance on God), a central concept in classical Sufism.[74] Kazan mentioned this concept above, and Kılıç implied it in his words. Tiryaki affirmed: 'Tevekkül is another value that I learnt and that is required in this art. Calligraphy is not something that you can achieve on your own without the help of Allah. You give so much time of your life to calligraphy, but if Allah does not let you, you do not come up with a good piece.'[75]

A state of surrender towards God is required to achieve moments of openness of the intellect and of the heart, in order to receive inspiration (*ilham*) from a higher plane of Existence. Çevik affirmed that 'belief can be conveyed to hand and paper through inspiration (*ilham*)' and that 'all calligraphers receive *ilham*', which 'is a feeling that comes suddenly, it is a strong emotion. All artists perform their art with

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[73] Kılıç 23:09.
[74] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 117–20.
[75] Tiryaki 25:06.

the help of Allah, even without realising it. Inspiration always comes from somewhere, from a Divine Source. I wait for *ilham* to happen.'[76] He also added that sometimes he experienced a descending inspiration on his soul during night time, or while living his daily life, unexpectedly.[77] Kazan also added that the outcome of her works depends on the inspiration she receives, and on the spiritual state she is experiencing: sometimes she can write a piece in a few minutes, feeling satisfaction and contentment; sometimes hours of work result only in waste of paper.[78]

Çevik emphasised also the value of belief (*iman*) in the calligraphic practice. According to him, since Islamic calligraphy is rooted in Islam, that is, in Quranic verses, teachings and sayings, a calligrapher should not only be aware of the meanings of the verses which are transferred into art, but should also believe in those meanings, 'since no human being can earn success without fully believing in what he is doing. The first thing is to believe, then being patient, then being fully dedicated to the art.'[79] He also mentioned that almost every calligrapher is religious and a practicing devout Muslim, because 'the only path to become successful in the art of calligraphy is believing in what you are writing.'[80] Nevertheless, according to Çevik not only perfecting belief is required in walking the calligraphic path, but also perfecting the art. He mentioned that during the Ottoman Empire thousands of scribes were copying non-religious texts and manuscripts, about history, geography, literature, sociology, and they were not required to be perfect in their writing; the art of calligraphy though 'deals not with words written by humans, but with eternal words revealed by Allah' and it thus requires the achievement of a mature, perfect and elegant art expression.[81]

Ferhat Kurlu offered very insightful reflections on the relationship between the art and the understanding of sacred verses, and religious concepts. According to him, calligraphy implies understanding the verses, experiencing the teachings, and

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[76] Çevik 42:09.
[77] Çevik 1:00:06.
[78] Kazan 40:35.
[79] Çevik 28:34.
[80] Çevik 40:19. Hasan Çelebi affirmed to me that during his life he met at least two calligraphers, outside of Turkey, who were not Muslim, but Christian.
[81] Çevik 30:37.

feeling spiritual realities. He offered a vision of a unified life of understanding, spiritual feelings, and art practice:

> Every statement that I practice in my calligraphic art, is a source of learning for me. When I understand and grasp the meaning of a statement from Allah, I believe that afterwards Allah allows me to write it in the best way. As an example, *wa alladhīna āmanū ashaddu ḥubban lillahi.*[82] If I am successfull in understanding and in practicing this verse in my life, loving more and more Allah, then Allah will let me write it very well. I wrote that verse, but I tried maybe more than ten times. Another is *wanaḥnu aqrabu ilayhi min ḥabli al-warīdi.*[83] You have to experience and feel the closeness of Allah in order to write it. Once you live it, you can write it. I think the only people who would understand these feelings related to experiencing and writing calligraphy, are either calligraphers or people who are knowledgeable about Islam.[84]

From his words emerges the fact that calligraphy propels calligraphers not only towards the direction of artistic creativity, but also intellectual and spiritual understanding and growth. Nevertheless, not having achieved complete maturity in the understanding of sacred verses, is a part of the spiritual journey. The spiritual development proceeds in stages and states, and it is not possible to achieve complete wisdom in all the aspects and teachings of the spiritual life, without a process of gradual transformation. The following passage demonstrates a very honest and intimate reflection of Kutlu on a verse he perceives as problematic:

> There are statements I practiced from the beginning when I started to be a calligrapher, and still, until now, I cannot execute. One of them is *inna allaha ishtarā mina al-mu'minīna anfusahum wa-amwālahum bi-anna lahumu al-jannata.*[85] I tried to write this verse more than one hundred times, but I still cannot figure out how to create a composition out of it. The reason why I cannot reach a mature artistic expression of that piece, is that I still did not finish my learning lesson, and

[82] Q. 2:165: 'But those who believe are more ardent in their love of God.'
[83] Q. 50:16: 'We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.'
[84] Kurlu 33:02.
[85] Q 9:111: 'Truly God has purchased from the believers their souls and their wealth in exchange for the Garden being theirs.'

> this is connected to technical aspects as well. But most important, I did not learn my lesson because Allah wants to buy my life and my properties, but I am not sure if I want to sell. Therefore, I think my lesson has not been learned until now. The meaning of the verse is to dedicate your life and your properties to Allah, giving yourself completely to Allah, giving everything that you have freely to Allah.[86]

It is understandable that reaching a state when one is ready to completely, totally, and absolutely dedicate his or her life and all of his or her properties to God, represents a very rare spiritual obtainment. The verse interpreted by Kurlu resonates with the Sufi concept of 'dying before dying', achieving true poverty (*faqr*) and annihilation (*fanā'*) in God.[87]

Finally, Özçay enumerated all the layers that according to him constitute the art, starting with belief (*iman*): 'The art of calligraphy is the outcome of certain different dimensions, namely belief, morality, artistic feelings. It is a composition of them all. You can add also spirituality and inspiration to it. There is a mystical dimension lacking in other visual arts.'[88] He further revealed the importance that the sphere of belief has had in his conceptualisation of the art, referring it to the belief in the existence of an otherworldly dimension, seen as a source of serenity and tranquillity for the soul:

> I am a devout Muslim, and since the calligraphic art is involved in, and integrated with, religious textual material, that gives me a sense of peacefulness and good feelings. What motivates me is that the art of calligraphy, and living a life integrated with calligraphy, are not only for this world, they also link you to the other world, and that is what makes me feel calm and tranquil in my life.[89]

As it has been demonstrated in chapter two, calligraphers are aware of death, and practices such as collecting the chips of the pen to warm up the water that will wash

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[86] Kurlu 45:06.
[87] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 70, 123; Lewis, *Rumi - Past and Present, East and West*, 417–18.
[88] Özçay 19:05.
[89] Özçay 14:22.

their dead bodies, or visiting cemeteries, are all reminders of the final human destination. According to Özçay, the practice of the art confers to him serenity in the awareness that his life has been filled with religiosity. The final destination may thus appear not as a dreadful menace, but as a new hope – as a scented garden radiating lights of union and emanating perfumes of spiritual attainment.

5.3 The Ijāza as the End and the Beginning of the Path

The attainment of the license to teach and sign the calligraphic works, may be seen by some people as the pinnacle of the art. I will demonstrate that, in the perception of calligraphers, notwithstanding the fact that the *ijāza* is a very prestigious achievement – formally introducing the calligrapher into the community of calligraphers as a master – it also presents the burden of responsibility. In this section I will discuss how and when a master decides that the student is ready for the license. I will then introduce the *ijāza*, showing an example of a contemporary document. I will subsequently demonstrate how the chain of transmission is considered to be important for the perpetuation of the art, and according to Kurlu how this guarantees also a perpetuation of the blessings of the masters of the past. I will then present the views by Kılıç, Özçay and Syed on the importance of continuing to perfect the art even after the attainment of the license. Subsequently, I will discuss dangerous emotions that the obtainment of the *ijāza* may trigger in a calligrapher, such as a sense of proudness and superiority, and I will point out how sincerity, humbleness, and the awareness of being simple scribes of the Divine Word can help in overcoming those dangers. The main responsibility after the attainment of the license lies in the expectation to teach the art, with the aim of perpetuating the tradition, and in striving with excellence towards a constant improvement. Lastly, I will introduce the circumstances under which it is possible to contribute with new insights to the development of the art.

The master is the only one who decides when it is the right time to confer the *ijāza*, evaluating the technical and moral maturity of the student on the path. Students cannot decide or suggest to their master to reach that stage: ‘The master assesses the

advancement of his students and decides when they are ready and ripe to achieve the *ijāza*.'[90] Fatih Özkafa summarised the moral requirements needed to obtain the *ijāza*:

> No one can get the secrets of this art straightaway. Waiting and being patient are crucial in this art. You need to develop not only your calligraphic performances, but also your moral values and a good character to deserve the *ijāza*. Showing respect and love to the master, being persistent in religious duties, such as having ablutions (*wuḍūʾ*) and praying five times a day, are essential. The verses and sayings you have written should be practiced in your daily life. Your actions should follow those words. You should also deeply know calligraphic designs and compositions, from the past to the present day. You should have also a good amount of knowledge on Islamic art history and philosophy.[91]

As can be gathered from Özkafa's views, the artistic maturity is not considered to be enough: the student should demonstrate some of the virtues and qualities that we have discussed in depth in the previous sections.

When the master considers that the student is ready to become a master, he or she grants the license without expecting or requesting a monetary exchange. As Özkafa explained: 'This art cannot be taught in exchange for money. I have not paid anything when learning calligraphy; nor my students give me money. It is only for the sake of Allah.'[92] The training is free, and obtaining the license is free as well; another element that emphasises the spiritual character of the art of penmanship, which can be taught in exchange for money only at a University level, within Fine Arts departments, or when taught in institutions or structures that need money to fuel their activities and to cover their costs. Within the traditional one-to-one calligraphic teaching, a master is never paid, because teaching the art for God's sake only is one of the responsibilities required after obtaining the *ijāza*. A calligrapher makes a living selling his or her art pieces, but not transmitting the knowledge of the art.

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[90] Özkafa 43:10.
[91] Özkafa 18:07.
[92] Özkafa 41:28.

The practice of transmitting the authority to sign calligraphic works, and to teach the art, has been institutionalised through the *ijāza* since the fifteenth century.[93] The *ijāza* is a certificate written primarily by a student who demonstrates the achieved mastery of the art, copying a calligraphic piece penned by one of the great masters of the calligraphic tradition. The master selects what the student has to copy, choosing from a variety of calligraphic materials, such as Quranic verses, traditions, *hilye*s (descriptions of Prophet Muhammad), prayers, or poems.[94] The student writes a composition in one or two of the styles that he or she has studied, usually from a minimum of three years to a maximum of six years. Students typically start with *sülüs* and *nesih*. A different *ijāza* has to be achieved for each and every other style, which can be studied under the guidance of a different master, and which requires more or less the same amount of time for achieving its mastery, depending on the student's capabilities and circumstances. The student does not sign the *ijāza*. Usually at the bottom of the certificate the master attests that his student has been licensed to use the expression *kitabahu* (written by), that is, he or she has been authorised to sign calligraphic works, and therefore he or she can be officially identified as a calligrapher (*hattat*).[95] The master mentions the name of the new licensed calligrapher and adds date and place. At least another master calligrapher approves, endorses and signs the document. The masters usually write words of encouragement, praise God for having being blessed with writing and with the gift of calligraphy, and wish to the new master a long and blessed life full of beautiful calligraphies, and full of accomplishments in the art, for the sake of Allah.[96] A formal ceremony may be organised, usually in a mosque, with different other calligraphers, during which the student is invested with the *ijāza* and becomes a master. Nowadays, the IRCICA organises ceremonies during which respected masters are invited to welcome the novel masters, who receive their formal recognition within the broader community of artists.[97]

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[93] Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 40.
[94] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 41.
[95] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 491.
[96] Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 42, 44.
[97] 'IRCICA International Gathering on the Art of Calligraphy'.

With the aim of providing an example of a contemporary *ijāza*, the analysis will now be focused on the license obtained by Mehmed Özçay in the styles *sülüs* and *nesih* in 1993 (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 *Mehmed Özçay: ijāza, Istanbul, 1993, 42 x 49 cm. © www.ozcay.com*

The panel is a copy of a composition written by the great Ottoman master Mehmed Şevkî Efendi (1829–1887).[98] In the first top line written in *sülüs* we read the following: 'The Prophet of Allah, peace be upon him, said'. The central part is written in *nesih* in slanting lines: 'Shall I teach you a saying which when repeated Allah the Most High will remove your sorrow and settle your debt? Say every morning and evening: O Allah! Guard me against grief and sorrow, and save me from indolence, avariciousness and cowardice: guard me from the difficulties of debt and the affliction of men.' On the horizontal line below, written again in *nesih*, we read: 'Truly spoke the Messenger of Allah. O Allah bless our master Muhammad and

[98] See Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 140.

all of his family.'[99] The above constitutes the work written by Özçay. In the three boxes at the bottom of the piece we find the official statements authorising and certifying the student to sign his works by his master Fuat Başar on the left, and reinforced and endorsed by Hüseyin Kutlu at the centre, and also by Hasan Çelebi at the bottom right. The masters also recollect in their words exponents of the calligraphic lineage (*silsila*), contextualising the new calligrapher within the broader unbroken tradition.

In reference to the *silsila*, Kurlu affirmed that it constitutes a vital link between the spirituality of the great masters of the past and the contemporary calligraphers. The spirituality of the first ones flows into the creativity of the masters of this day and age, in the same way as in Sufism blessings and spiritual power (*baraka*) are transmitted throughout the centuries through the chain (*silsila*) of transmission of spiritual knowledge from master to disciple.[100] Intense spiritual practices carried out by Ottoman masters still manifest their fruits and blessings today:

> Creativity comes from the spirituality (*manevilik*) of calligraphers in this path (*yol*). If the art has improved so much it is because of the spiritual adventure of calligraphers. Sometimes some calligraphers, like Sufi mystics, would stay for forty days (*arbaʿīn*) in isolation, withdrawing themselves from the world and asking the help of Allah; it is a practice in Sufism, once isolated they would rid themselves from attachments, and they would create something precious.[101]

The practice of the Forty-Day isolation, in Arabic *arbaʿīn*, is a Sufi practice of spiritual retreat and seclusion (*khalwa*), during which the mystic can perform fasting, intense prayer, meditation, ritual ablutions, and vow of silence.[102] As it has been demonstrated in chapter one, section one, the Turkish calligraphic tradition started with the visions descended on Şeyh Hamdullah during one of his retreats. To my

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[99] Özçay, 140.
[100] See the concept of *silsilat al-baraka* in Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 149, 183.
[101] Kurlu 01:15:43.
[102] Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 30, 187, 190; Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, 314–17.

knowledge, these practices are not carried out anymore in the contemporary tradition. However, Kurlu affirmed that there is still a connection with those spiritual practices because of the chain (*silsila*) that links calligraphers with great masters of the past:

> I am not aware if recent masters have practiced the *arbaʿīn*. But even if calligraphers do not practice it, they have this spiritual connection with the past. For example, I can trace five hundred years in my calligraphic lineage (*silsila*) from pupil to master. We know all the names of the calligraphers in our lineage just like a family tree. Someone who does not know how to trace back his *silsila* and who does not know the history of his heritage, cannot be counted as a calligrapher.[103]

Kurlu started then to cite the long list of names of his calligraphic lineage, with rapidity and confidence. Derman provided a very useful genealogical map of the main masters within the Turkish tradition, in the six scripts and in *ta'lîk*, an essential tool to trace the history of the art.[104]

Several reflections on the meaning and the consequences of the achievement of the license will be presented. According to Kılıç the *ijāza* does not represent the end or the zenith of the calligraphic path, but just one step on the journey. When I asked to him for how many years he studied with Hasan Çelebi, he replied that he is still carrying out his studies with his master, because the calligraphic path does not possess a peak, it rather offers a series of levels of constant improvements, one after the other, through which 'the road gets steeper and steeper'.[105] He mentioned also that the calligrapher has different responsibilities that were not present at the beginning of the path:

> At the beginning the master makes the art more attractive. So, you get many 'well done!' (*aferin*), even if your works are not so promising. But the masters would like to hold on to their students, to keep them on the way. Similarly to the Sufi methods. So, it is not advised to push people out of the way, out of the path. You should

[103] Kurlu 01:15:48.
[104] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 186–88.
[105] Kılıç 02:59.

> always be welcoming. So, when I had just started with Hüsrev Subaşı, he was very encouraging. And with Hasan Çelebi I felt also very much comfortable: I was welcomed in many ways. But when you get the *ijāza*, all the responsibilities are on your shoulders. And you are walking the steep path to the zenith. And there is no zenith. The *ijāza* is not the zenith, it is one of the targets, one of the stations in your long journey. Maybe the first one.[106]

Özçay also mentioned that the technical improvement never ends: commitment and constant effort should be always manifested in the calligraphic path. For instance, he sometimes performs again works that he has already written in the past, with the effort of improving his artwork and overcoming the imperfections that he spots: 'There is no end in the improvement of the art, maybe only the speed in writing changes. Even today I can see myself improving.'[107] In a similar way, Syed mentioned to me that the journey towards excellence is a never-ending journey. The desire to improve should always stimulate a calligrapher: 'After I got the lessons, I got the *ijāza*, I reached proficiency. And a new journey began. Efdaluddin *hoca* made it clear. After the *ijāza* you do not rest, the doors are open to start.'[108]

The path, after the attainment of the license, is not only characterised by a continuous self-improvement and technical enhancement of calligraphic forms and compositions, it is also characterised as a moral and spiritual test. Kılıç critically warned about the dangers of what I define as the *dark side* of the *ijāza*:

> When you get your *ijaza*, you feel stronger. And this may cause some problems in your career. Because some people are not able to adjust to that new situation they are in. Some may think that they can do anything, and they feel proud. This may take a couple of months for some people, but sometimes a person can be swollen by that strange mood for his whole life. You may be fooled by Satan (*şeytan*). Your proudness may lead you to be harsh to the people around you; this may happen: I know some people who became very rude to their masters after receiving the *ijāza*, because they thought they have reached the same level. They thought to have all the

[106] Kılıç 04:07.
[107] Özçay 48:22.
[108] Syed 16:45.

> privileges, but actually they got there just because they walked the way, they climbed the stairs. The *ijāza* is just one of the levels, there is more to go.[109]

As it has been mentioned, the qualities of the path, such as respect and humbleness, should never be dismissed. Kılıç affirmed that only through sincerity and humility towards God, the calligrapher may be able to discover his or her task: not to achieve fame and glory, but to be a vehicle of Divine Words. The intoxication of proudness can be overcome only reaching the awareness of the responsibilities a calligrapher has, which consist in carrying out the tradition and in being a scribe of the Divine Text: 'the effort is to make the Divine Text readable – of course beautiful – and without mistakes. The main effort is to highlight the meaning, to make it clear. That sincerity may change you forever, in a positive way.'[110] Concerning the teaching responsibilities, he affirmed that the calligrapher is in a state of obligation towards the tradition. The calligrapher is endorsed to teach, not only to act as a calligrapher. He or she is expected to transmit the art, to the people who ask to be taught, exactly in the same way through which calligraphic knowledge has been passed through centuries, without changing the traditional artistic heritage.[111]

Özkafa provided interesting reflections that will help us to conclude and summarise the issues discussed so far. He treasures primarily the continuation of the art, from master to disciple, no matter how few or numerous the students are:

> It is not important how many students you have. A master does not need to have hundreds of students, even one student is enough to reach the goal: one good student who is able to continue the art! And studentship lasts forever in the art of calligraphy. There is never an end, even after the *ijāza*. I study about five to seven hours every day. Last year, while writing a Quran section (*juz'*), I have studied ten hours a day. A break, even if it is for a day, will negatively affect your art. I do not take breaks even during my vacations. Sometimes I do neglect my family and

[109] Kılıç 05:38.
[110] Kılıç 17:25.
[111] Kılıç 07:10.

> relatives for the sake of this art, which is not a good thing to do. There is never a break in calligraphy, even in dreams![112]

Finally, Kılıç affirmed that contributing to the development and evolution of the art may happen only under some very specific circumstances. The main responsibility consists in continuing the tradition, imparting the technical and moral teachings as they have been imparted by the master. Nevertheless, in some very rare cases, new features may also be transmitted to new generations:

> Adding something only happens when you get to the edge. When you have absorbed everything you can, then you may be expected to add some more to the generations to come, to the tradition. And there are many failures, because many people at one point may think they have cleverly invented something new: a new font, a smart connection, a new composition. But the next day you find the same thing in one of the old compositions! [*laughs*] So you have to explore, you have to learn whatever had been done in a wide historical spectrum in that subject, and then with all that experience and knowledge you can maybe add something new.[113]

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the ethical dimension of calligraphy, conceived by calligraphers as a path, requiring the development of moral virtues and qualities. I have explained the multifold layers existing under the term path, an image used in the Quran, in traditions and sermons attributed to ʻAlī, and in Sufism. The existential human experience has been often equated to a journey of purification, transformation, change, and illumination, through challenges and victories. I have identified three main elements of the calligraphic path: (i) the relationship with the master; (ii) the development of qualities at the level of the self, at the level of the

[112] Özkafa 44:20. For an analysis of dreams related to calligraphy, see chapter four, section three, where I have shown that Ottoman and contemporary calligraphers dream to be instructed by great masters of the past.
[113] Kılıç 07:46.

interactions with others, and at the level of the relationship with the Divine; (iii) the attainment of the *ijāza*, which transforms a student into a master.

The relationship between a master and a disciple has been described in terms of love, gratefulness, respect and emotional attachment. That relationship connects the student also with the heritage of the art, with centuries of practice, artistic creativity, and spiritual submission to the Divine. I showed that the guidance of the master is manifested primarily through the example, rather than verbal teaching. Moments of direct moral and spiritual instruction may rarely take place. Collective gatherings aimed to the transmission of stories and anecdotes of past calligraphers are usually organised, during which students are exposed to cultural aspects, rather than technical.

The calligraphic practice pushes the student towards the development of qualities that strengthen and empower the self, such as the willingness to be changed and to accept the master's ways, patience, serenity, dedication, constancy, concentration, relaxation, balance, moderation, peacefulness and contentment. The calligraphic practice presents moments of blissful writing, described as sweet as tasting honey, but also moments of restlessness, inner battles and hardships.

I have shown that the art does not only require the development of qualities for the improvement of the self, but it also impacts the way artists interact with other human beings. As it has been demonstrated, the qualities that the calligrapher should display in relation to other human beings are characterised by a sense of morality, respect, sincerity, nobility, dignity, politeness, tolerance and benevolence. The art has also an effect on how society interacts with calligraphers, who are highly regarded and respected by the religious segments of Turkish society.

I have explored how calligraphers relate to the Divine, interfacing with aspects related to belief and spirituality. The aspects that emerged during the interviews are the following: being constantly aware of the Divine Presence (*iḥsān*), doing everything for God's sake, relying on God (*tevekkül*), being inspired by Him (*ilham*), perfecting belief (*iman*), reflecting and meditating on His words (*fikr*), reaching tranquillity in the awareness of our final destination, that is, death. The honest reflection by Kurlu on some challenging Quranic verses, led him to the awareness that he is not yet ready for reaching the stage of poverty (*faqr*) and

annihilation (*fanā'*) – an element that shows the endless dynamism of the path: being a master does not mean having reached the peak of spiritual maturity in all the aspects of the path, reachable only by a very limited number of souls.

The attainment of the license to teach and sign calligraphic works, the *ijāza*, could be wrongly perceived as the end of the path. Notwithstanding the fact that it confers prestige and formal recognition within the community of calligraphers, it also involves a new level of commitment and responsibility. The path should be indeed walked without pauses. The qualities needed to achieve the *ijāza* should be endlessly cultivated. Every new calligraphic style that the calligrapher wants to acquire, pushes the artist to start the path over and over again, from its beginning. I have discussed the requirements and the circumstances under which a master decides that the student is ready for the attainment of the license. I have described in depth what the certificate displays and testifies, analysing an example of a contemporary document, the *ijāza* in *sülüs* and *nesih* obtained by Mehmed Özçay in 1993. I have subsequently demonstrated how the chain of transmission (*silsila*) is considered important for the perpetuation of the art, and how it contextualises a calligrapher within the Ottoman heritage. I have shown that according to Kurlu the *silsila* guarantees also a perpetuation of the blessings of the masters from the past to the present. I have presented then the views by Kılıç, Özçay and Syed on the importance of continuously perfecting the art after the attainment of the *ijāza*. Subsequently, I have discussed the criticism raised by Kılıç on the dangers that the *ijāza* may trigger, which I defined as the *dark side* of the *ijāza*: a practitioner may fall under the seducing illusion that the path is over, and that the zenith has been achieved, leading to a sense of pride and disrespect towards the master, and a sense of aloofness towards other human beings. Only sincerity and humbleness can lead back to the path, according to Kılıç, with the awareness of being humble vehicles and servants of the Word. Finally, I have discussed the main responsibilities after the attainment of the license, which lie in teaching the art and in perpetuating the tradition.

CHAPTER SIX

REMEMBRANCE AND WORSHIP

In this chapter I will show that in the perception of calligraphers, one of the aims of their art is to help people remembering the Divine. The art of penmanship is simultaneously seen as an act of remembrance for the calligrapher, and as an act of remembrance for the observer.

The art starts with the remembrance of God. As it has been shown in chapter three, a student of calligraphy writes for weeks, months or years, a prayer of divine assistance in the practice of the art. When a calligrapher has achieved the mastery of the art, the act of remembering God can be brought to a new level, and can fully manifest itself: the calligrapher becomes an agent of remembrance, not only in private practice, but also in displaying remembrance at a social level. Through the calligrapher's works, exhibited in religious or social places, such as in mosques, people are reminded of several aspects of the Divine, such as His Names and Attributes, His messengers, His utterances of wisdom and guidance.

The concept of remembrance comes from the Arabic and Quranic term *dhikr* (Turkish *zikir*). According to the Quran, the remembrance is the ultimate aim of worship: 'Truly I am God, there is no god but I. So worship Me, and perform the prayer for the remembrance of Me' (Q. 20:14). The remembrance is seen as a refreshing balm which brings peace to the inner being of human beings, as expressed in the verse 'those who believe and whose hearts are at peace in the remembrance of God. Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God?' (Q. 13:28). The remembrance not only brings feelings of peace, but it is also perceived as forgiveness in itself: 'For […] men who remember God often and women who remember [God often], God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward' (Q. 33:35). Human beings, who constantly enter into a state of forgetfulness, and in that way of distance from the Divine Essence, Source of all goodness, and truth, and beauty, are invited to return to a state of remembrance, awakening their consciousness with God's Presence: 'remember thy Lord when thou dost forget' (Q. 18:24). Being in a state of

spiritual awakening and presence is also linked to being aware of the self, since forgetting God is equated to forgetting who we are: 'And be not like those who forget God, such that He makes them forget their souls' (Q. 59:19). Finally, an intimate verse alluding to the reciprocity between the believer and the Creator, attests: 'So remember Me, and I shall remember you' (Q. 2:152).

The concept of *dhikr* became central especially in Sufi practices, including also meditational techniques with the use of dance and music. One of the most frequent practices consists in chanting Divine Names and invocations. *Dhikr* is seen as an act of synthesis and recollection, as opposed to *fikr*, the analytical discursive thinking. In Sufism, *dhikr* has been distinguished between remembrance of the tongue, of the heart, and of the inner being (*sirr*), through a process of gradual interiorisation.[1]

As it will be demonstrated in this chapter, calligraphers described to me their art as a form of remembrance and worship. I will present Ferhat Kurlu's reflections as an introductory summary of their perceptions of calligraphy as an act of remembrance. Kurlu affirmed to me that the most used material in the art of penmanship is from the Quran, since it is considered as 'the centre of Muslims' lives and the heart of religion.'[2] Given the centrality of the sacred text, Kurlu affirmed that calligraphers consider their artwork as a form of remembrance (*zikir*), devotion and worship (*ibadet*).[3] As far as the content of the calligraphic textual material is concerned, he mentioned that calligraphers prefer to transfer into art verses which possess positive and encouraging meanings, such as those related to Paradise (*cennet*), the nature and the remembrance of God, God's advices, and words of wisdom, opting to leave usually aside those verses related to menace (*tehdit*), punishment (*ceza*), and Hell (*cehennem*).[4] My examination of the contents of the calligraphic works published in catalogues, and of those displayed in all the mosques that I have visited in Turkey, attests the truth of Kurlu's words. Another subject transferred into art by calligraphers, is death, possessing a negative connotation in

[1] L. Gardet, 'Dhikr', ed. P. Bearman et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* 2 (1991): 223–26.
[2] Kurlu 23:38.
[3] Kurlu 24:29.
[4] Kurlu 25:15.

common perception, but seen by some calligraphers as a reminder of our final destination, under the light of eternity and Divine Mercy.[5] Concerning the dimensions of worship and remembrance, in relation to the art, Kurlu offered these valuable reflections:

> There are also verses in the Quran where God Himself teaches how to pray to Him, through prayers used by previous prophets, and prayers of some good and righteous (*salih*) people from the ancient past. There are other verses which describe the beautiful qualities and names of Allah, as for example His Compassion, or His Light. The reason behind the choice of these subjects, is that the art of calligraphy is not only a visual experience, it also *reminds* people about all of these themes. Here it is written 'Yā Allāh' (O God!) (Figure 6.1). Here there is a verse saying that wherever you are, Allah is with you.[6] The art of calligraphy is not only about beautiful aesthetics and design, it has also a spiritual meaning. Here it is written the Light verse, *allāhu nūru al-samāwāti wa al-arḍi* [*Kurlu recited in Arabic only the first sentence of the verse*].[7] The reason why I wrote these verses is to remind people of the nature of Allah and of Islam.[8]

[5] Kurlu 26:21.
[6] 'He is with you wheresoever you are' Q. 57:4.
[7] 'God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.' Q. 24:35.
[8] Kurlu 27:58.

Figure 6.1 *Ferhat Kurlu: Yā Allāh, Turkey, 2012. © Ferhat Kurlu.*

In a similar way, also Soraya Syed described unequivocally the aim of calligraphy in terms of remembrance: 'The ultimate purpose is to make human beings ultimately aware of the Divine.'[9]

Calligraphers are able to carry out the task of reminding people of the Divine especially through one of the most evident contributions of their artwork: the transposition on architecture of Quranic verses and Divine Names.[10] Through the artistic projection of these verses in religious spaces, 'the presence of God is indicated by the Image of the Word.'[11]

While I was visiting the studio of Öksüz in Konya, he showed to me how calligraphers transfer their pieces on walls and domes. Öksüz displayed some huge

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[9] Syed 48:07.
[10] Murat Sülün, 'Qur'anic Verses on Works of Architecture: The Ottoman Case', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and İrvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 159–77.
[11] Erica Cruikshank Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, vol. 1 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981), 17.

rolls of transparent paper with massive writing in *celî sülüs.* The calligraphic strokes were completely pierced by a relatively small needle, so that, once the rolls are placed on the walls, a sponge impregnated with charcoal can leave traces on the walls, subsequently painted by a painter.[12]

In the following sections, I will illustrate some specific examples of calligraphy as remembrance. First, I will exemplify cases in which calligraphers portray Names of God in their works. Secondly, I will introduce a specific type of calligraphic works, the *hilye*, centred on the description of Prophet Muhammad. Finally, I will unveil the experiences of my participants on ways in which the art of calligraphy becomes an act of remembrance.

6.1 Remembering the Creator

Calligraphers may focus their artwork on remembering God, leading the observers to concentrate their minds on the Divine, through three main ways: (i) depicting Divine Names on different media, such as walls of mosques or calligraphic panels (*levha*); (ii) writing the *basmala* in manifold styles and forms; (iii) writing Quranic verses which describe the Divine Nature.

The first way to convey the remembrance of God is through His beautiful names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*).[13] A tradition attributed to Abū Hurayra, reports that God has ninety-nine beautiful names.[14] Calligraphers portray one or some of these names and attributes on single panels, or including them all together in one composition. In this section, I will offer three examples from contemporary calligraphers whose works, in three completely different styles, centre on the depiction of Divine Names.

The first work is a panel penned by Öksüz, in which all the ninety-names are comprised (Figure 6.2). At the top the name of Allah has been written in *celî sülüs,* together with the honorific *jalla jalālahu* (May His glory be glorified). Within the numerous squares, the ninety-nine Names of God have been written in *nesih.*

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[12] For a detailed analysis of the process, see Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 497.
[13] Q. 7:180; 20:8; 59:24; 17:110.
[14] L. Gardet, 'Al-Asmāʾ Al-Ḥusnā', ed. P. Bearman et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* 1 (1986): 714–17; Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*.

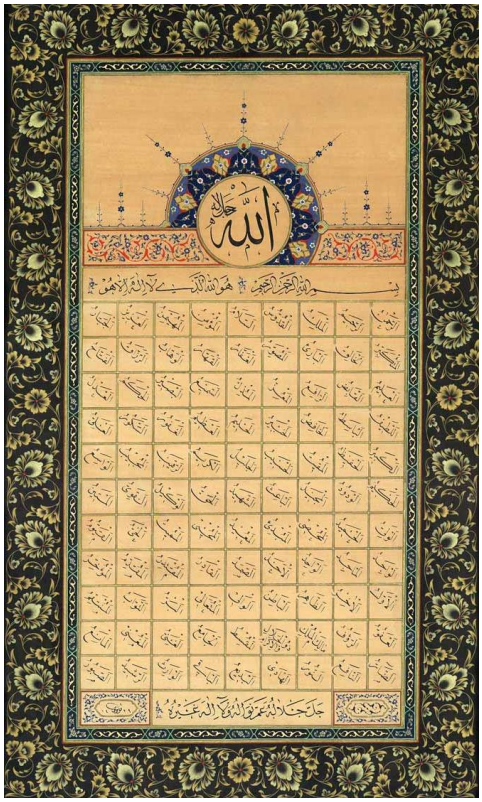

Figure 6.2 *Hüseyin Öksüz: Ninety-Nine Names of God, Turkey, 2008. © www.kalemguzeli.org*

Another work by Kurlu, consist in a panel written in a *celî sülüs* mirrored composition. In the piece, there are the words *huwa al-ghanī* (Q. 35:15), meaning He is the Rich, the Independent, the One Who lacks nothing (Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3 *Ferhat Kurlu: huwa al-ghanī, Turkey, 2011. © Ferhat Kurlu.*

The work penned by Kılıç is another example of a Divine Name, written in a completely different style, the *celî ta'lîk*, where the invocation *yā qadīr* (O All-Powerful!) can be read (Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4 *Efdaluddin Kılıç: yā qadīr, Turkey. © Enderun Sanat.*

The initial invocation which introduces all of the suras of the Quran, with the exception of the ninth, is *bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* (in the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful). On the *basmala*, a saying attributed to 'Alī reports that 'whoever writes 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful' in beautiful writing will enter Paradise without account.'[15] Perhaps because of this promise, perhaps because the invocation is used to attract blessings at the beginning of every activity, perhaps because it reminds of the Divine Attributes of Mercy and Compassion, perhaps because of its technical features (as the presence of multiple vertical strokes) allowing to shape the words in multiple ways; because of all of these possible reasons, the *basmala* became one of the most portrayed verses in Islamic calligraphy. Examples of the *basmala* abound in calligraphic books and catalogues.

[15] Cited in Roxburgh, 'The Eye Is Favoured', 279.

For this reason, I will provide only one example, a very elegant *basmala* in *ta'lîk* penned by Hasan Çelebi (Figure 6.5).

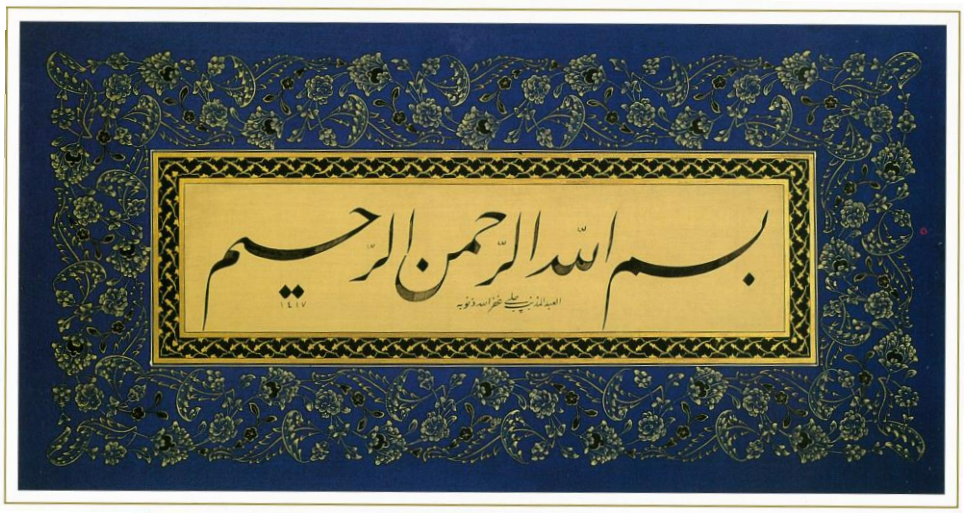

Figure 6.5 *Hasan Çelebi: basmala, Turkey, 1996, 28 x 55 cm. After Derman et al., Hattın Çelebisi, 49.*

Finally, the remembrance of God can be carried out by the calligrapher portraying entire verses which focus on the nature of God. I will offer two examples of this: a recent mosque built in Istanbul where Kutlu wrote the calligraphic elements, and a circular composition by Syed.

The calligraphic compositions on the dome of mosques, usually offer beautiful examples of the art of penmanship, both from the artistic point of view and in the selection of the textual material, often describing the Nature of God. For instance, the astonishing calligraphy in the dome of Süleymaniye Mosque portrays God's dominion as extending over the earth and the heavens: 'Truly God maintains the heavens and the earth, lest they fall apart. And were they to fall apart, none would maintain them after Him. Truly He is Clement, Forgiving' (Q. 35:41).[16]

The Şakirin mosque has recently been built in 2009 in Istanbul, located at one of the entrances of the Karacaahmet Cemetery in Üsküdar. Its calligraphies have been written by Hüseyin Kutlu in a golden *celî sülüs* (Figure 6.6). The mosque

[16] See Gülru Necipoğlu-Kafadar, 'The Süleymaniye Complex in Istanbul: An Interpretation', *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 110.

displays on its dome the verse of Light, describing the Divine reality as a resplendent outpouring: ‘God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things’ (Q. 24:35). The dome originates circular descending spheres of writing, surrounding the entire prayer room, in which all the Divine Names have been written.

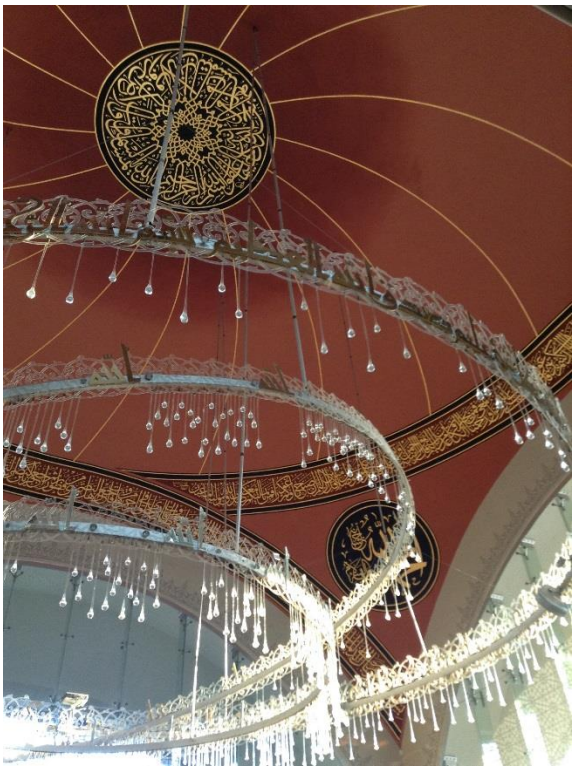

Figure 6.6 *Dome of the Şakirin mosque. © Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari.*

Finally, a circular concentric composition by Soraya Syed in *sülüs* repeats four times the first verse of sura 112: ‘Say, “He, God, is One”’ (Figure 6.7). The verse represents one of the most important characteristics of the Islamic conception of the Divine: His Oneness and Unicity.

Figure 6.7 *Soraya Syed: qul huwa allāhu aḥad, 2011. © www.artofthepen.co.uk.*

6.2 Remembering the Messenger

The *hilye* has been described by Safwat as a 'verbal image of the Prophet'[17], and it literally means 'ornament', 'decoration', or 'jewel'. It consists in a calligraphic aniconic description of the spiritual and physical qualities of Prophet Muhammad, written on a panel to be hanged on walls. In this section, I will introduce this specific genre among calligraphic works.

In Islam Muhammad is considered to be a unique human being, messenger (*rasūl*) of God, and an example of ethical conduct for Muslims. The Quran affirms that every community has received a message who guided human beings on the Path of goodness and truth.[18] Remembering the messenger, is considered as a way to get closer to his message. The Quran itself invites the believer to invoke blessings and peace to the Prophet (Q. 33:56), establishing a spiritual connection with the one who brought the message of the Straight Path.

Within the Turkish calligraphic tradition, Hâfiz Osman (1642–1698) is seen as the originator of the *hilye*. The contemporary tradition still imitates his calligraphic outpourings. Notwithstanding the fact that his style of *hilye* is the most

[17] Safwat, *The Art of the Pen*, 46.
[18] See Q. 10:47; 16:36; 40:78.

copied, different forms of it can be detected, for instance, also in the form of a Mevlevi hat,[19] displaying a majestic *basmala* in the shape of *tuğra*,[20] or with original spinning pinwheel motives.[21]

In this section I will describe the traditional form of *hilye*, analysing a specific work by Özçay in *sülüs* and *nesih* (Figure 6.8).

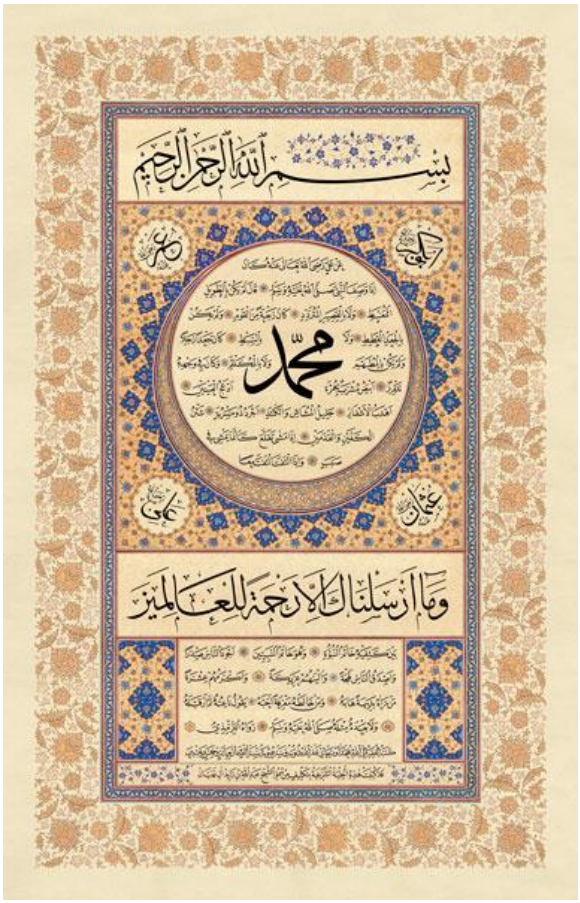

Figure 6.8 *Mehmed Özçay: hilye, Abu Dhabi, 2004, 121 x 77cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

The *hilye* starts at the top with the *basmala* written in *sülüs*. All around the big central medallion, there are four smaller circles with the names of the Four Caliphs in *sülüs*. At the centre of the composition, the name of Muhammad is written

[19] Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)*, 128.
[20] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 180–81.
[21] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, 314–15.

in *sülüs.* In the large line below the circular text, there is a verse from the Quran written in *sülüs*, in reference to Muhammad: 'And We sent thee not, save as a mercy unto the worlds' (Q. 21:107). The text written in *nesih* in the large circular section of the work, and continuing in the inferior section, is a description of the Prophet attributed to 'Alī. I offer here a translation of the text, heavily influenced by the one provided at the Hilye-i Şerif (Noble Ode to the Prophet) and Rosary Museum, recently opened in 2016 at the Siyavuşpaşa Madrasah in Eminönü, Istanbul:

> [it is related] from ʿAlī (may God be pleased with him) that when he described the attributes of the Prophet (may prayers to God and peace be upon him), he said: He was not too tall, nor he was too short, he was of medium height amongst the nation. His hair was not short and curly, nor was it lank, it would hang down in waves. His face was not overly plump, nor was it fleshy, yet it was somewhat circular. His complexion was rosy white. His eyes were large and black, and his eyelashes were long. He was large-boned and broad shouldered. His torso was hairless except for a thin line that stretched down his chest to his belly. His hands and feet were rather large. When he walked, he would lean forward as if going down a slope. When he looked at someone, he would turn his entire body towards him. Between his shoulders there was the Seal of Prophethood, and he was the last of the prophets. He was the most generous of men, the truest of people in his words, the most mild-mannered, and the noblest in companionship. Those who first saw him would be awed, and those who knew him personally loved him. Anyone who described him would say 'I never saw the like of him, either before or since.' May God bless him and grant peace.

This is another way through which calligraphy operates as a way to help people connecting with their beliefs and their religious heritage, keeping the faith grounded in the soil of the memory of the past.

6.3 Worship and Calligraphy

Calligraphers described to me their art as a form of worship. In this section I will first focus on the objects, that is, the calligraphic pieces portraying supplications, invocations, and prayers drawn from the Quran as forms of calligraphic art.

Secondly, I will focus on the subject, presenting an overview on different opinions held by calligraphers about their state of ritual purity when they perform the art: the fact that all of my participants considered as important to perform ablutions before the practice of the art – especially before writing Quranic verses – highlights that calligraphy possesses a strong religious character. Finally, I will analyse the act of creating calligraphy as an act of remembering, praying and supplicating. The views that I have gathered around this subject fundamentally turn around two points: (a) calligraphy in itself is considered as an act of worship; (b) calligraphy is similar to an act of worship, but cannot straightforwardly considered as worship.

6.3.1 Prayer into Art

Calligraphic panels, among all of their themes, may display prayers and invocations. These prayers may be in the form of a plea (*duʿāʾ*),[22] taken from religious traditions, or in the form of Quranic verses, or in the form of short invocations as *allāhu akbar* (God is great), or *mā shāʾa'llāh* (God has willed it). Among the numerous instances of prayers projected into art, I will offer two examples penned by Kutlu and Kurlu, in which Quranic verses can be considered as prayers.

The first specimen is a calligraphic panel in *celî sülüs* written by Hüseyin Kutlu (Figure 6.9). The prayer recites: 'Our Lord! We believe; so forgive us and have mercy upon us, and Thou art the best of those who are merciful' (Q. 23:109).

[22] See, for instance, Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 78.

Figure 6.9 *Hüseyin Kutlu: Q. 23:109, Turkey, 2006. © Hüseyin Kutlu.*

The second example has been profusely commented upon by Ferhat Kurlu, during our interview. It consists in the prayer of Abraham, a prayer offered by the father of the Semitic monotheistic religions that we find in the fourteenth sura, starting from the verse thirty-five (Figure 6.10). The following has been the reflection on this specific prayer offered by Kutlu:

> There is another *levha* which is often written, displaying the prayer of the Messenger Abraham, considered a prophet by the three monotheistic religions. There are many prayers by Prophet Abraham, but this particular prayer is so special that is recited during our five prayers, every day. 'My Lord! Make me a performer of prayer, and my progeny. Our Lord! Accept my supplication! Our Lord! Forgive me and my parents and the believers on the Day when the Reckoning is come.'[23] Abraham asks to Allah to pray in the most truthful and sincere way, and that his descendants may pray in the same way. He also asks to Allah to accept his prayer and to forgive him, his mother and his father, and all the believers on the Day of Judgement. This prayer by Prophet Abraham has been told to us by Prophet Muhammad, and it was included in our *namaz*, therefore I perceive this as very important in my life. I do not usually write every verse or every prayer as a final piece, more than ten times, but I wrote more than ten versions of this verse. I practice this verse both in calligraphy and in

[23] Q. 14:40-41.

my prayers. This piece was meant to be a piece for a mosque at the beginning, but then, once I experienced and felt the prayer, I started writing it more and more.[24]

The verse can be recited as an additional prayer uttered towards the end of the *namaz* (Islamic daily prayer), after the *tashahhud*, which is an extended formula of the declaration of faith (*shahāda*).[25] The prayer has been written by Kutlu in a dense *celî sülüs.*

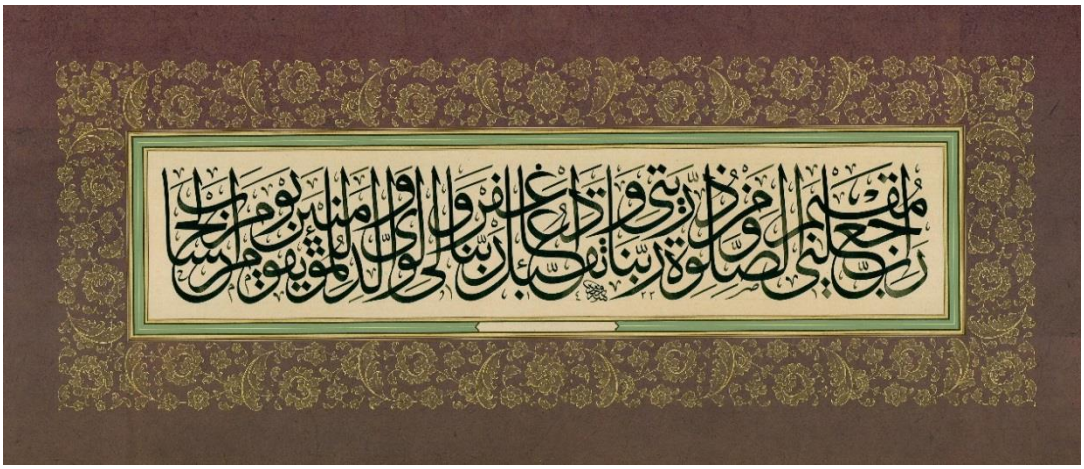

Figure 6.10 *Ferhat Kurlu: Q. 14:40-41, Turkey, 2011. © Ferhat Kurlu.*

6.3.2 Ritual Purity

All my participants reported that they consider important to be in a state of ritual purity while writing Quranic verses, performing ablutions (*wuḍūʾ*) before starting the calligraphic practice. *Wuḍūʾ* is a ritual of cleansing from impurities.[26] Since the majority of my participants expressed exactly the same feelings, I will outline here only the other different opinions, and I will present the position of Özçay as an illustration of the general sentiment:

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[24] Kurlu 38:43.
[25] Marion Holmes Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.
[26] E. Chaumont, 'Wuḍūʾ', ed. P. Bearman et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* 11 (2002): 218–19.

> I am really careful when I write Quranic verses to have performed ablutions. According to a verse in the Quran, only the clean ones can touch the Quran. I always try to have ablutions, every time before writing, because I think that this is a way of being respectful to the sacred words that I write. I cannot say that I had ablutions whenever I practiced calligraphy, but I try to be really careful about this, because it means to be respectful to the Quran.[27]

The verse Özçay referred to, is 'Truly it is a Noble Quran in a Book concealed. None touch it, save those made pure' (Q. 56:77-79). For the same reason, Kurlu expressed the same view, adding the interesting practice of rolling the paper, when the performance of ablutions is not possible to make:

> We do not touch the Quran without having performed the ablutions, because it is a rule in the religion. So, it is necessary for all calligraphers who write the verses of the Quran to perform ablutions. If a person had ablutions he is already practicing *ibadet*. Ablution is a much-practiced advice, it is a heritage from the training of previous masters to students of calligraphy. We, sometimes, roll paper, from the outside to the inside, [*he showed to me how to roll a piece of paper, keeping the written part inside*] so that if we did not have ablutions, we do not touch the holy verses.[28]

Interestingly, Kutlu affirmed that the ablutions should be practiced because the pen is sacred, not only the verses. He explained that since God swore on the Pen, and on writing, these are both sacred. Therefore, a calligrapher should not touch the pen without having ablutions, but he acknowledged that this is not always practiced, but it should be practiced.[29]

According to Çelebi, it is possible to write without having ablutions, but not until the verse is completed and it becomes an actual Quranic verse, when all the letters together form a meaning. However, he added: 'That said, I do not remember even one time that I practiced calligraphy without having ablutions before. The

[27] Özçay 43:23.
[28] Kurlu 58:16.
[29] Kutlu 01:10:56.

reason is that the final version of a verse should not be touched by an unclean hand, so I perform ablutions at the beginning of my writing session. While I am touching the calligraphic verses with the words of Allah, I want to be in a state of purity.'[30]

Çevik performs the ablutions only when writing Quranic verses. He acknowledged the fact that having ablutions before the calligraphic practice is more a Turkish tradition, rather than a religious obligation, but he would still feel to be disrespectful in writing while not in a state of purity.[31] He mentioned that according to the calligraphic custom, all calligraphers should have ablutions before starting to write. According to Çevik, this act operates as a means to prepare body and soul to the calligraphic work, and to purify and cleanse body and soul. Traditionally, calligraphers believe that they are performing an act of devotion (*ibadet*) while writing their art. However, according to Çevik, in Islam it has not been instantiated that writing a sentence equates to worship:

> In Islam *ibadet* implies something different, like doing the obligatory prayer (*namaz*), fasting, and other things. According to some Muslim religious scholars, there is no obligation for people who are reciting or reading the Quran to have ablutions. However, Muslim believers usually have ablutions before reciting or reading the Quran as they have respect, loyalty and dedication to their religion, and they see having ablutions as good manners. Therefore, calligraphers believe that they should have ablutions, even if this practice is not prescribed in the Quran. And this custom lasted until today. Especially calligraphers who are writing Quranic verses have always had ablutions, thinking that this is the right way to do. I also believe that I should have ablutions before writing a Quranic verse. But sometimes I write also non-religious verses, such as *men dakka dukka* (what goes around comes around). One was *bu da geçer ya hu* (this too shall pass!). Sentences like these, as sayings or lines from poetry. Sometimes calligraphers may write colloquial and ordinary sentences. Once, I wrote *takma kafana* (pay no mind, do not worry). I do not believe that I should perform ablutions before writing these sayings.[32]

[30] Çelebi 01:04:08.
[31] Çevik 01:15:20.
[32] Çevik 01:20:55.

Syed expressed a similar position: 'I used to be very strict about having ablutions each time, but I then realised it was not always practical. It depends also on what I am writing.'[33]

From the exposition of all these positions, it is clear that all of my participants desire to be in a state of purity only while writing the Quran, while some do not consider the ablutions necessary while writing other types of textual material.

6.3.3 The Act of Remembering, Worshipping and Supplicating the Divine

During the interviews that I have conducted, I identified two positions on the understanding of writing as worship. My intention was to comprehend whether the act of writing could be considered by calligraphers, in itself, as a form of remembrance, worship or prayer. The first group of calligraphers, here represented by the views of Kılıç, Çevik, Kurlu, the Depeler brothers, and Öksüz, consider the art as similar to the performance of prayers; the second group, represented by Tiryaki, Özkafa, Başar, Kazan, and Syed, consider it as an act of prayer in itself.

Kılıç presented a rather nuanced approach on the subject of calligraphy as a form of remembrance or devotion. He discussed calligraphy as a way to get closer to the Quran, hence, closer to God. However, he did not define straightforwardly calligraphy as a form of *zikir* or *ibadet*. Calligraphy may possess the same function of practices of remembrance and prayer, however, according to him, the act of performing calligraphy does not equate *tout court* to a form of worship, because it has not been sanctioned in the Quran. He clarified that, in his opinion, all Islamic designed rituals are contained in the Quran, like pilgrimage or ritual prayer, 'so you cannot invent anything in addition to that.'[34] The consequence of this statement is that he believes that calligraphic writings cannot replace Quranic injunctions related to the sphere of prayer and devotion. A calligrapher should perform all the rituals sanctioned in the religion of Islam, and only to complete the devotional life he or she

[33] Syed 40:50.
[34] Kılıç 37:47.

may consider the art as a way to fulfil religious aspirations.[35] Kılıç is aware that 'many calligraphers may perform calligraphy as *zikir*' and that while writing Quranic verses, they cannot avoid to reflect on the meaning of those utterances; the art of penmanship is thus 'something that gets you closer to the Quran, so – here you are – you are getting closer to Allah.'[36] Notwithstanding the fact that calligraphy may strengthen belief, and may assist the individual soul in approaching the Divine Reality, Kılıç did not desire to name his art as *zikir*, because he affirmed that it is not the responsibility, and it is not within the field of authority, of a calligraphy master to 'invent new forms of prayer'; furthermore, he believes that a master should rather advise ways to deepen the knowledge, the reflection, and the practice of the Quran, but he should not neglect the performance of Islamic prayers and rituals, practicing instead the calligraphic art only.[37] He added that 'as a responsible person and a believer, I do not want to name calligraphy as a new, not designed, and not written Quranic law.'[38]

Çevik held a similar position to the one expressed by Kılıç. He distinguished between what Islam teaches, and what the majority of the calligraphers think to do while performing their art, that is, to carry out an act of worship. To him, calligraphy is only comparable to worship, and it is a sign of good character at the eyes of God. He mentioned that writing a sentence does not constitute worship, strictly speaking.[39] He also mentioned that the meaning of verses provides life to letters and words, and for that reason 'calligraphers are thinking that they are doing *ibadet* while writing. Calligraphers perceive this art as a proof to demonstrate that they have been good persons and devout Muslims. When they will be called by Allah into the next world, calligraphy will be one of the proofs of their goodness.'[40]

According to Kurlu, calligraphy is similar to worship because it has been equated by him to the release of a message, from God to people:

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[35] Kılıç 40:23.
[36] Kılıç 40:36.
[37] Kılıç 41:20.
[38] Kılıç 45:08.
[39] Çevik 01:15:20.
[40] Çevik 01:38:16.

> If the calligrapher is conscious about what he is doing, then his art becomes something like *ibadet*, a good act of worship. Once I finish it, I have to be aesthetically satisfied with the piece, if I am not, I will not show and give the piece to others. The religious message and the art go hand in hand. There are some artists who paint the walls of churches in the West, and these are messages. They depict important stories of Christianity in religious buildings. When you will see it from this point of view, you will see the similarities. They also do not perform their art just to convey something visually beautiful, there is a message behind their art as well. And the ones who want these painters to present their art, they also do not want something only visually beautiful, but they want something with a message too. So, aesthetics, message, and belief, they all go hand in hand.[41]

According to Kurlu, calligraphy may also be performed parallel to special moments of the Islamic devotional life, such as during the month of fasting: 'In some special occasions just like Ramadan, some days like Friday, and in some times of the day, spiritual emotions can rise.'[42] Kurlu also added that 'in Ramadan for example, which is a holy time when I fast, I pray, I do not eat, I understand the situation of those who are suffering. Early morning is also a very special time for calligraphic practice, when, in the modern world, life has not yet begun, or after midnight.'[43]

The Depeler brothers also mentioned a similar concept about integrating the practice of the art with prayers: 'After the *zuhr* prayer we come to our studio, and we practice calligraphy until seven or eight in the evening, then we go home, we do our *isha* prayer, and we work again until going to bed. Not because we are forced to work that hard, but because we love calligraphy and we enjoy spending hours on it.'[44] Subsequently, they revealed that according to their views, calligraphy is similar to *ibadet* and *zikir*:

> Calligraphy can be considered as a form of *zikir*. We absolutely believe so. It is similar to *ibadet*. That is why we perform the ablutions before writing. It is not

[41] Kurlu 53:32.
[42] Kurlu 59:58.
[43] Kurlu 01:01:13.
[44] Depeler brothers 22.08.

> exactly *ibadet* because only Allah's orders, in verses and traditions, can define an act of devotion. We would rather say that it is like *ibadet*. ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and other Islamic leaders, gave a great value to calligraphy. That is why we consider it like *ibadet*.[45]

Hüseyin Öksüz interestingly differentiated *ibadet* and *zikir*, conferring to *ibadet*, most probably, a sense of duty and obligation. He mentioned to me that calligraphy cannot be equated to *ibadet*, because it is love.[46] He stated, though, that calligraphy is similar to *zikir*: 'while writing the *Basmala* on paper, the sound that the pen makes is like the sound of *zikir*. Calligraphy can be considered as prayer, a praise to Allah and a way of training the soul.'[47]

Özçay revealed that the calligraphic experience of writing an entire Quran has been an important and central moment of his devotional life: 'Writing Quranic verses in calligraphic art and *karalama* is a spiritual experience. I can understand the spirituality of the verse that flows into me.'[48] I asked to him to expound on the concept of the internalisation of the word of God, drawing from his experience, in 1986, when for a year and a half he wrote an entire Quran. Özçay described that time as a mystical experience, as the peak of his religious experiences and emotions, leading him to undergoing 'spiritual states'. He added that 'sometimes there were some situations, occasions and happenings that I have interpreted as very spiritual.'[49] He also preferred not to disclose anything more about that period, since he considered it as too special and personal. I understood, of course, his desire for privacy, and I have respected his wishes, also in accordance with my methodology (see Appendix A).

Ayten Tiryaki affirmed that the spirituality of her art originates from reading, reciting, listening and writing the Quran, which she described as the heart of both her life and her art.[50] 'I believe all of this is worship: reading, reciting, listening and

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[45] Depeler brothers 37:05.
[46] Öksüz I 36:25.
[47] Öksüz I 41:38.
[48] Özçay 44:56.
[49] Özçay 45:55.
[50] Tiryaki 38:41.

writing. Those activities are all *ibadet*. Probably in that sense this religion is unique, because as far as I know, there is no other religion in which you recite, and listen to, and read, and write a sacred text.'[51]

In reference to the use of other special prayers in connection to the art, Tiryaki mentioned that sometimes she feels the need to perform the *hacet namazı*:

> First of all, I never ever perform calligraphy without having ablutions. Sometimes I recite a special prayer just for myself, the *hacet namazı*, a prayer offered for the accomplishment of a specific purpose or need, where you pray Allah to accept you and to help you to achieve something. The *hacet namazı*, the demanding prayer, exists in the Islamic religious literature, but it is not an obligatory prayer that you have to perform every day at a specific time. You can do it whenever you want, and in my case, I do it because sometimes I spend so much time on writing calligraphy, and praying helps me to achieve a great outcome, not only spending a lot of time in practicing. There are some special prayer times in which according to Muslims in Turkey you can pray. For examples, when it rains, during the *azan*, sometimes some special hours at night, those are the times when I believe, as most of Muslims in Turkey, Allah would accept my prayers. Usually in my life, I pray to Allah in those times, without missing a prayer.[52]

She mentioned also that she does not necessarily perform the *hacet namazi* before her writing starts, however, whenever she prays, also performing the Islamic obligatory prayer, she addresses her art in her supplications, with the aim of achieving excellence in her calligraphic art.[53] Finally, she highlighted the fact that her religious life and her artistic expressions are deeply interwoven:

> All the questions you asked, are all related to me to my religious life: my life-story, my art experience, my spirituality. This is my approach. It could be different for someone else. Someone could not perceive calligraphy as spiritual as I perceive it. But generally speaking, spirituality and religion are very important to the art of

[51] Tiryaki 39:03.
[52] Tiryaki 45:53.
[53] Tiryaki 49:40.

calligraphy. There is a saying by Hz. ʿAlī: 'Writing is all about hard working, having a good master and religiosity'.[54] This saying is very crucial and summarises all the important aspects concerning the art of calligraphy.[55]

In a very similar way, Fatih Özkafa considers to be blessed by the fact that his spirituality and his profession are fully integrated:

> İbn Atâullah el-İskenderî[56], a Sufi scholar, said: 'If you wish to see your worth in the eyes of Allah, look at what your occupation is.' I could be doing something else, other than being a calligrapher. However – *al-ḥamdu lillāh*! – I am writing the verses of the Quran. I am performing them by praising Allah. We can consider calligraphy as a form of *ibadet*. It is *ibadet*. In Islam *zikir* is also considered as *ibadet*, and also thinking (*fikir*) is considered *ibadet*. I practice calligraphy for the sake of Allah.[57]

When I asked to Fuat Başar if he considers the art of penmanship as an act of worship, his answer has been very straightforward and interesting, connecting the art to the inherent sacredness of Nature and every human being:

> This art (*sanat*) is worship (*ibadet*). This art is also daily life. Every minute, every second of our lives are integrated with art. Because we live in this nature (*tabiat*) and nature is, from the bottom to the top, sacred (*kutsal*). This nature is, from the bottom to the top, a divine artwork. Even though you are not Muslim, I perceive you as a human being, as an artistic creature of Allah. People are not only human beings, but also aesthetic creations of Allah! I think we should not harm any kind of art, we should see the art and the artist as beautiful. We see you as an artistic creation, therefore we do not want to harm you, and we do not want to have fights with you. We want the wars of the world to come to an end. If every person perceived all the

[54] She paraphrased in Turkish the tradition that I have discussed at the very beginning of chapter five, mentioned by Özkafa, and referred to, by Kılıç, on his website.
[55] Tiryaki 50:18.
[56] Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1351), Egyptian Sunni Sufi scholar, disciple of Ibn ʿAlī al-Anṣārī al-Mursī (d. 1287) and adversary of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).
[57] Özkafa 39:44.

> people, and every art, in this way, then the world would become really good and peaceful – a beautiful place.[58]

Derman elaborated on the integration between worship and calligraphy, but without providing his personal perspective, rather drawing an example from the Ottoman past. He referred to the calligrapher Ramazan Bin İsmail Efendi (d. 1680)[59], who devoted his life to copying the Quran:

> Most of calligraphers would consider their art as a form of *ibadet*, *zikir*, or as a spiritual exercise. An example came to my mind. The calligrapher Ramazan Efendi in the seventeenth century, in Istanbul, wrote more than four-hundred complete Qurans. Let me tell you how he could write four-hundred Qurans. After the Morning Prayer he did not go to bed, and he used to start writing. Until he wrote half *juz* of the Quran, which is around ten pages, he would not accept anyone to enter into his room to talk to him. And that was happening every morning after the Morning Prayer. In that way, in two months Ramadan Effendi was able to finish a Quran. And in one year he could finish six Quran. He would not change his principles even if a governmental person, or the Sultan himself, wanted to see him. He would say: 'No, I have to finish the *juz* of the Quran I am writing'.[60]

Hilal Kazan considered also the art as a devotional act, based on the fact that she considers the Arabic letters as sacred, and all the religious texts transposed into art as sacred. For this reason, she wants to be in a state of ritual purity while practicing the art. She acknowledges that the origin of the sense of sacredness that she perceives, comes from the Quran:

> The reason why we have the art of calligraphy is the very existence of the Quran. No one did want to create a calligraphic art out of a novel. The words and letters from the Quran are holy, because they are in the Quran, and that is why we want to write them, and an art form had been developed out of them. Also, the Arabic alphabet

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[58] Başar 01:50:11.
[59] Derman, *Letters in Gold*, 62–63.
[60] Derman 47:44.

had been perfected and made uniform because of the Quran, and in order to copy the Quran. The calligraphic writings and decorations in our mosques exist because of the Quran.[61]

Moreover, she mentioned that the sacredness of the art is unique, since it has been originated because of religion, and it did not receive the influence of any other art outside of it: it was not affected by other arts in its own development. It progressed thanks to Muslim calligraphers who were not looking outside calligraphy for their inspiration. For examples, Ottoman mosques were influenced by Byzantine architecture. She described calligraphy as a case of 'pure Islamic art'.[62] As an example, she mentioned that the Ottoman mosques have been inspired by the model of Byzantine churches, and all have Aya Sofia as their mother archetype. Also, other Islamic arts have been directly influenced by other cultures, but calligraphy, according to Kazan, 'is a pure Islamic art. It had its own unique development'.[63]

Soraya Syed considers calligraphy as a form of *ibadah*, and she does not conceive any separation between her way of expressing her religiosity, and the way she performs her art. In reference to calligraphy, she mentioned that 'its purpose is *ibadah*, and I do not separate *dhikr* and *ibadah*.'[64] Concerning the prayers and supplications raised along with the practice of the art, she mentioned to me that she always starts pronouncing the *basmala*, and that sometimes she may dedicate a *namaz* when she is struggling with the creation of a piece. Interestingly, she mentions that she often recites the *Rabbi yessir* prayer, a prayer learnt during her first period of training, and that she continues to verbally recite it very often, not only in the context of calligraphy.[65] After revealing these aspects of her devotional life, she exclaimed: 'That is how calligraphy impacted my life as a whole!'[66] When I asked to her if she was reciting the prayer also during the act of writing itself, she replied that when she uses the prayer in the context of calligraphy, she recites it only before writing or

[61] Kazan 50:40.
[62] Kazan 55:05.
[63] Kazan 57:02.
[64] Syed 39:30.
[65] Syed 40:50.
[66] Syed 42:13.

during breaks, but never while she performs writing. While writing, she feels the need to keep a state of neutrality, described in chapter four, able to not trigger alterations in her breath and heart beating.[67]

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that in calligraphers' perception, one of the aims of their art is to help people remembering the Divine.

I have shown examples of works that focus on the remembrance of God through the depiction of Divine Names, writing the *basmala*, and writing Quranic verses which describe the Divine Nature, such as the verse of Light.

I have described a specific genre among calligraphic works, the *hilye*, which consists in describing the spiritual and physical characteristics of Prophet Muhammad, transferring into paper the love for the messenger.

Calligraphers described to me their art as a form of worship. I have demonstrated that this dimension takes place in three different ways. The objects produced by calligraphers may be prayers in themselves, as invocations, supplications, or verses from the Quran revealed in the form of prayers. Secondly, I presented an overview on different opinions on the importance of being in a state of ritual purity while practicing calligraphy. The conclusion of my analysis, is that all of my participants desire to be in a state of purity while writing the Quran, but some do not consider it to be important while writing non-sacred materials. Finally, I analysed the act of creating calligraphy in itself as a form of worship. I have demonstrated that the views gathered around this subject are divided into two groups of calligraphers: (a) those who perceive calligraphy as similar to an act of worship, but not sanctioned as worship, strictly speaking, by the Quran; (b) those who consider the act of writing, in itself, as worship.

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[67] Syed 42:48.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEAUTY, FORM AND MEANING

From the realm of worship and devotion we take wing in these last moments of our journey to the realms of abstraction and Divine Beauty. In Islam, the discourse on beauty is central to the thought of several religious scholars, mystics and philosophers, and it encompasses the fields of ontology, theology, cosmology, cosmogony, ethics and chivalry, and psychology.[1] I will present some notions relevant to the field of calligraphy and to the reflections presented by contemporary calligraphers in connection to the concept of beauty.

In Islamic thought beauty (*jamāl*) is one of the essential names (*ʾasmāʾ*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God.[2] A very influential tradition attributed to Prophet Muhammad states that 'God is beautiful and He loves beauty' (*allāh jamīl yuḥibb al-jamāl*).[3] The Divine is not only beauty in itself, but also a Source of beauty and proportion in creation. God is the One 'Who created seven heavens one upon another; no disproportion dost thou see in the Merciful's creation. Cast thy sight again; dost thou see any flaw?' (Q. 67:3). He is also the One 'Who created everything, then measured it out with due measure' (Q. 25:2). According to the Persian polymath Ibn Sīnā (c. 980–1037) God is Necessary Existence, source of radiating pure beauty and splendour (*al-jamāl wa al-bahāʾ*), conferring harmony to all things, and infusing all things with Its attributes.[4] All things constitute a harmonic combination of elements, led by the principle of Unity in multiplicity as a reflection of the One, providing Existence to everything. In a similar way, according to Al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111) the saying 'God is beautiful and He loves beauty' explains why souls love God and are attracted to Him, since He reveals his majesty and

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[1] Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Rūzbihān Baqlī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 11–27.
[2] See Q. 7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24.
[3] Murata, *Beauty in Sufism*, 12.
[4] Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 14.

beauty reflecting His attributes on all beautiful things.[5] All existence is a reflection of the Light of Divine Existence, and thanks to that pervading light, to all things beauty is granted.[6] Ibn al-Haytham (c. 965–c. 1040) takes a less metaphysical, and more mathematical approach: beauty is measurable, and consists in mathematical order, symmetry, proportionality and harmony of all things, including the beauty of writing (*ḥusn al-khaṭṭ*).[7] Thus, calligraphy can be described as an unfoldment of geometrical proportions – from the point, to the line, to the moving line inscribed in a circle: the London-based calligrapher and scholar Ahmed Moustafa amply demonstrated in a recent study how mathematical and geometrical proportions govern the construction of letters in the system of proportioned writing established by Ibn Muqla (885/6–940), where letters are constructed following the principle of the golden ratio.[8] As Derman reported, the art of calligraphy 'is a spiritual mathematics that is created by using material tools.'[9] Through calligraphy the One, the Infinite, the Sublime, folds itself into the multiplicity of finite beautiful letters, expressing the beauty of their Source in the proportionality of the script.[10]

In the daily religious experience of Muslims, according to the scholar Kermani, the beauty of the Quran is primarily experienced aesthetically, 'as a poetically structured text and as a musical recitation' and 'the reception of the scripture as an aesthetic phenomenon is one of the essential components of Islamic religious practice.'[11] Calligraphy can be considered as the transposition on a visual plane, rather than aural, of the aesthetical experience of the Divine Text. The stirring phonic beauty of the Quran shifts in calligraphy into a photonic visual experience:

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[5] Richard Ettinghausen, 'Al-Ghazzālī On Beauty', in *Art and Thought*, ed. K Bharatha Iyer (London: Luzac & Co, 1947), 162.
[6] Ettinghausen, 165.
[7] Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, 22.
[8] See, in particular, Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 1:20, 90, 101; Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 2:287–97, 563–67.
[9] M. Uğur Derman, 'The Ottoman Calligraphy', in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation*, ed. Kemal Çiçek, vol. 4 (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, 2000), 659.
[10] On the relationship between infinite, finite, and enfoldment in Islamic calligraphy, see Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), 229–30, 254–59.
[11] Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), vii.

the words are encapsulated in forms that enthral the eye, as well as the words are able to affect the heart.

In the following pages, I will first provide the views held by some calligraphers on the concept of beauty in relation to their art, seen as an act of abstraction, creativity, and reminiscence of the beauty of the spiritual world from which souls have been originated. I will then unveil the interpretations related to the tension between meaning and formal shape of a calligraphic piece, showing that the majority of the calligraphers I have interviewed consider the meaning to be the most important aspect to be conveyed through the art of penmanship. I will finally focus the analysis on some specific examples of art pieces, where the form itself becomes a vehicle of meaning, and the interrelations between meaning and form appear to enhance not only the visual power of the piece, but they also intensify its meaning.

7.1 Beauty: Abstraction, Creativity and Pre-Existence

In this section I will present the views of Kutlu, Kurlu, Çevik and Başar on the aesthetical dimension of the art of penmanship. During the interviews I have conducted with them, they wished to express their views on what they consider to be the beauty in calligraphy. I have observed similar and shared positions in their understandings of the aesthetical dimension, conceived to be characterised by the elements of originality, abstraction, and creativity, rather than by imitation of nature. I also acknowledged some differences in the perception of the art as: (a) accessible only to a few people who possess the capacities and the competency to understand it, such as in the position held by Çevik, or as (b) accessible to everyone, being universal and based on the same humanity emerged from the metaphysical realm of Pre-Existence, such as in the position held by Başar.

Some calligraphers stressed the importance that their art does not involve the imitation of nature, but it constitutes an abstract and original creative activity. In particular, Hüseyin Kutlu declared that calligraphy is different from painting, where the imitation of nature may be involved, and it is thus perceived by him as an abstract art. In fact, he distinguished different levels of abstraction in the art of calligraphy, explaining the difference between a *thing*, the *word* that refers to that thing, and the

artistic creation shaping the letters of the word that refers to the referred thing, a distinction that evokes the difference between signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*) articulated by the linguist and semiotician Saussure (1857–1913):

> A painter would go and paint what he sees, but there is no spirit in this. He just tries to imitate nature. If calligraphy was like painting, then it would have been only an imitative art. Words are abstract realities; you have only the sounds and shapes of letters. For example, consider the word 'milk'. If you have some milk in front of you, it exists, it is there, but the word referring to milk is abstract; you do not see it, it is intangible. In calligraphy if we write, for example, the word 'milk', we then see also a form. The word is abstract, and we find an abstract shape for that word through calligraphy. But, of course, in reality milk, the word 'milk', and the expression of the word 'milk' in calligraphic art, are quite different from each other. So, this means that I am doing something really new and creative in my art.[12]

Hence, Kutlu considers not only the signifier as abstract, but also the calligraphic creation as the abstraction (the *calligraphic form* of a word) of an abstraction (the *word* itself), requiring therefore a high level of conceptualisation and creativity. The art of penmanship can be thus considered not only a non-imitative art, but also, using a mathematical terminology, a *squared* abstract art.

Against the mimetic dimension of some arts, and highlighting the originality of the art of penmanship, is the position held by Ferhat Kurlu, who during our interview reiterated twice the concept that the beauty that appears in calligraphy is something unique, whose source of inspiration is not to be found in nature: 'The art of calligraphy has its own original aesthetics; calligraphy does not imitate nature, and it is inspired by your own soul (*ruh*), and your creativity.'[13] He wanted to return to these concepts at the end of our interview, an element that indicates the importance that he granted to this subject:

[12] Kutlu 38:00.
[13] Kurlu 09:57.

> Now, I would like to add something which I think is important, and you have not asked about. In this world, there are many arts which are trying to imitate the art of Allah in creation, like painting, photography, architecture, music. But the art of calligraphy has, somehow, something original and unique. We create something new, which does not exist in nature. Every graphic shape of letters is something that you cannot see in nature and it is something that you would not think it could be better and more beautiful than what it is; those letters which have been created by calligraphers are unique. I see similarities between the new inventions in this world like cars, air planes, marine vehicles, telephones, between all these new innovations, and the design of letters. But the difference between designing a car and conducting this art, is that after ten years a car could be *démodé*, because you can always produce a better version of it, while the art of calligraphy is a perfect art, from the beginning to the end, so that even after a hundred years, or after two hundred years, it will not be old fashioned. For contemporary calligraphers, the masterpieces of old calligraphers, of one or two hundred years ago, are great examples to imitate. Islamic art does not mirror nature in the world, it creates something new out of it, as you can see in calligraphy, in *tezhip*, and in *ebru* too; these are not the same arts, but you can see some similarities. We do not compare ourselves to Allah, we are not competing with Allah, because He is the One Who created this art that we are practicing, therefore there is no contest. What we have belongs to Him, it is a part of His art.[14]

Kurlu's position presents several challenging problems. While the attribute of abstraction in calligraphy emerged in different ways during my survey with calligraphers, as clearly and philosophically expressed by Hüseyin Kutlu, arts such as *tezhip* and *ebru* do present in fact mimetic elements, as floral decorative elements in the first, or, as we saw in chapter two, the representation of tulips in the second. In the following sections it will be shown that also in calligraphy, sometimes, the shape of the letters may evoke living creatures. Nevertheless, the majority of calligraphic works definitely possess a high level of abstraction. Another problematic element consists in the view that calligraphy has been always perfect and never changing. As

[14] Kurlu 01:06:01.

we saw in chapter one, calligraphy did change indeed, and the shape of the letters changed and evolved too. However, it is important to recognise a true and usually shared *sentiment*, rather than an objective historical statement, in Kurlu's views: Turkish contemporary calligraphers highly regard the art expressed by the Ottoman masters, especially those of the last two centuries, and they stick to aesthetic rules and standards achieved in those centuries, even when they acknowledged that the art did evolve, and changed over time.[15] Finally, the last point that I would like to discuss in reference to Kurlu's position, is the idea that the art of calligraphy has been invented by God Himself. It is clear to me the rationale behind the idea that the art of calligraphy does not compete with God, for the reason that it does not imitate nature and it is thus acceptable under the Islamic law. Nevertheless, it is more challenging to fathom the reason behind Kurlu's statement that the art has been *created* by God. After considerable reflection, I have realised that perhaps, in his views, as it has been shown in chapter five, the episodes of revelation and spiritual disclosure experienced by some calligraphers such as Şeih Hamdullah, are ways through which the Divine Will interacts and operates within the calligraphic tradition, shaping and spiritually leading the art.

According to Savaş Çevik the art of penmanship is characterised by a high level of abstraction. Furthermore, he stressed the fact that the art is less and less understood by people, in similar ways to how Western classical music is fading away from the taste of young Westerners. The art of calligraphy, in order to be appreciated, requires a certain high level of artistic knowledge and experience, together with proficiency in Arabic, and sometimes in Ottoman Turkish and Persian too. Moreover, it necessitates a religious belief and a religious understanding:

> Since we perform abstract drawings, we find it hard to explain what we are doing with this art. The hardest art in this world according to me is calligraphy, whether is Chinese, Japanese, or Islamic, if you do not have a sense of what letters and words mean, then you do not understand the art neither. This is comparable to a Turkish person who does not know English and who is listening to a Shakespeare poem

[15] 'The art changes, of course. How we would have had all of this, if it did not change?' Özçay 01:16:23.

> without understanding a word of it. One can look at a masterpiece without knowing the meaning of letters and words, and could think that that masterpiece is just an ordinary thing. Just like Western youngsters who do not enjoy Western classical music anymore. They do not have the culture, they are not interested in acquiring it, hence they are not even trained in Western classical music anymore, and they do not understand the art. Even compared to classical music, calligraphy is more difficult, since it is a distinct and very special way of art expression. Sometimes, if you listen to some pieces of classical music, maybe you will start to understand a little bit more of it, but calligraphy has its own special abstract aesthetics and design. Knowing is also not enough: some people may know what a calligraphic piece means, they may understand the design of letters and words, but if they do not believe, and if they are not religious, then they would not understand calligraphy.[16]

Çevik regards calligraphy as a unique form of art expression, distinct from all others. Being calligraphy deeply rooted in religion, it does not only require artistic knowledge, experience and understanding, but also belief in the values expressed through the art. Thus, its beauty appears to be recognised and appreciated only by a few who have the capacities to approach it, and the moral and spiritual convictions to accept its values.

Diametrically opposed to Çevik's views are those held by Fuat Başar. He also mentioned the elements of abstraction and originality of the art of penmanship, but highlighting common characteristics behind nature and calligraphy, that is, a harmony based on the same geometrical proportions. Furthermore, he affirmed that the same harmony which is detectable in nature, in art, and within human souls, has a universal and metaphysical origin. Balance, harmony and geometrical proportions are, according to him, signs of the *pre-existential beauty* assigned to all things and manifested in all things, a recurring idea in the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence (*anamnêsis*)[17] and in Islamic mysticism and philosophy.[18] Thus, in Başar's world

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[16] Çevik 47:40.
[17] Nickolas Pappas, 'Plato's Aesthetics', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University), accessed 21 August 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato-aesthetics/.
[18] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 24; Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Sahl At-Tustarī (d. 283/896)* (Berlin: De

view, all human beings actually can appreciate calligraphy, because they can recognise a beauty that has already been inscribed in their intimate beings, a beauty manifested in the elegance and regularity of matter, and in the sign of benevolence, kindness, tolerance and love already present in their spirits:

> Harmony in art, harmony in nature and harmony in the soul, they are all the same. This harmony gets us to the golden ratio. Now, Islam promoted the idea that you find in the science of lines (*hattatlık*). In the art of calligraphy, when the measurements are convenient to the proportions in nature, then you have beauty and art. Referring to the harmony you find in nature, you create something artistic. Before coming to this world, in Pre-Existence when the souls were with Allah, human beings were given a certain sense of geometry and harmony to feel and distinguish beauty. That sense of geometry and harmony was assigned to all of us, to all human souls. That is why when human beings see something in this natural world, even though they have not seen it before, they would say 'this is beautiful'.[19]

In Turkish poetry the Sufi idea of Pre-Existence has been inspired by the Primordial Covenant mentioned in Q. 7:172. The idea has been recalled by Rūmī, in a poem where all human beings are described to have listened to Eternal Divine Melodies, symbols of the archetypes of Divine Beauty and Truth, before creation:

> As we are all members of Adam,
> We have heard those melodies in Paradise,
> Though earth and water have cast a veil upon us.
> We retain faint reminiscences of those heavenly songs.[20]

Signs of remembrance of those Melodies will always be present in the soul, and the aim of the spiritual practice is to trigger a process of awakening, through which it will be possible to fully recover the awareness of those melodies. Başar also

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Gruyter, 1980), 45–49, 201–207; William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 154–55, 195.

[19] Başar 01:08:27.

[20] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi: The Spiritual Couplets of Maulānā Jalālu'd-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), 182.

illustrated a practical example, in order to demonstrate the existence of the innate sense of beauty inscribed within all human beings, as he described before:

> For example, in the 1950s or 1960s, I am not exactly sure about the dates, there was an exhibition in Beşiktaş about calligraphy, involving most of the Ottoman calligraphers like Şeih Hamdullah, Hâfız Osman, Şevki Efendi, but also some non-professional calligraphers. There were some tourists visiting the exhibition. Someone asked to the tourists: 'which ones are more beautiful for you?' The answer was: this, this, this and this… Hâfız Osman, Mustafa Râkım, Şeih Hamdullah, Şevki Efendi... They asked them: 'why?' This is an important question. Tourists answered that they did not know, but those works were beautiful – more beautiful than the other works. My question is: 'why they perceived those works as beautiful?' They sensed beauty! Their souls recognized harmony and beauty! The reason why they asked this type of questions to tourists, but not to people from the Islamic world, is that the last ones maybe would have heard about these calligraphers and they would have been biased in their judgement. Recognising beauty is not limited to cultures, but it is something coming out from our humanity (*insanlık*). Therefore, from this point of view we can totally say that this art is universal (*evrensel*). This is very important. The universality of art is something very enriching. Every student, every person should be involved in a way or another with art. Because every person should have an occupation, and in order to carry out your work well, you need art. Calligraphers try to do everything in a good manner and to always side with what is good. We should always do our work with excellence, and we should always defend and promote the sense of beauty. How people with a sense of beauty could be involved with bad things?[21]

Interestingly, Başar defined calligraphy as universal and deeply related to our common humanity. All people have the capacities to sense the beauty manifested in calligraphy, because all people can recognise the same proportions governing all beautiful things, and because they may be reminiscent of some signs of Pre-Existence inscribed in their souls. Moreover, Başar acknowledged the existence of a

[21] Başar 01:19:58.

moral dimension emerging from his conception of beauty.[22] In his words, beauty and goodness are deeply correlated. Beauty elevates the existential experience of a human being, and allows to reach excellence in human activities. Since beauty is conceived as pervading nature, as an art-work of God, it leads also to respecting nature itself and all of its creatures, seen as expression of the same Divine Creative Power. I have already elaborated on different concepts related to ethics and conduct in chapter five, but in the following passage Başar interestingly connected those with the aesthetic dimension:

> Morality is also part of all of that. People possessing this sense of beauty are aware of goodness too, and they do not harm other people, nature, and the world around them. A person from Turkey perceives another one, for example from Brazil, as a human being created by Allah. This is an outcome of that beauteousness. This art is really important because when people perceive something as beautiful, they do not want to destroy it, but to preserve it. No one would want to destroy something which is an artwork. This means that even wars in the world would disappear through art.[23]

Başar's views point out to the importance of recognising a common humanity, a common metaphysical origin, and universal laws governing everything and conferring beauty to everything, in changing the attitude through which human beings interact with each other and with the world around them. His statement, referring to the fact that what is considered to be beautiful should be preserved and not destroyed, appears to me to be so powerfully simple, and so powerfully true. Furthermore, Başar mentioned that universal beauty and universal harmony lead him to experience happiness, because imbuing himself within beauty and harmony allowed him to understand some aspects of the creative divine act:

> When my wife looks at me when I am writing, she notices that I am always smiling. She told me that after many years of observation. Writing is one of the biggest forms of happiness. When this is understood at the light of universal harmony (*evrensel*

[22] On the same concept see Moustafa and Sperl, *The Cosmic Script*, 2014, 1:111.
[23] Başar 01:20:06.

uyum) and universal beauty (*evrensel güzellik*), then human being has happiness. Universal harmony leads to happiness, and happiness leads to universal harmony. This is an incomparable happiness. If somebody would give me the world with all its treasures, I would not exchange it for that happiness. A calligrapher is happy because Allah created everything in its state of perfection. When a calligrapher is performing perfectly, creating perfect letters, that means that he understands how Allah created the world. He understands how the art of Allah works. He understands something of the perfection we can see in the world. And, of course, in the Quran there is a verse referring to the people who are writing as sacred (*kutsal*).[24]

7.2 Form and Meaning

This section is devoted to the investigation on the relationship between the formal aesthetic form of a calligraphic piece and its meaning. Calligraphers, within the boundaries of the traditional rules concerning the construction and the proportions of letters, try to manipulate those in order to obtain an aesthetic effect able to better convey the meaning, considered to be the most precious aspect to convey to their audience. Rūmī distinguishes in everything the levels of *ṣūrat* or form, and *maʿnā* or meaning: the form represents the exterior (*ẓāhir*) aspect of reality, while the meaning represents the inner (*bāṭin*) aspect of reality.[25] Thus, the appearance of things is only a manifestation of their truth, which has to be unveiled. In a similar way, calligraphers conceive the relationship between form and meaning in their calligraphic pieces: they value the aesthetic form and they strive to reach excellence and perfection at that level, but their intimate desire consists in sharing a deeper meaning. The two dimensions are not opposed, but harmonically connected. The meaning, though, is considered the most valuable aspect of their artistic production.

Özçay affirmed that he prefers to translate into art something which conveys a valuable meaning, and that he writes verses, traditions, sayings, or poems which possess a precious message to be transmitted to other people: ‘The audience will not only have aesthetic beauty from my works, but they will receive a message too.

[24] Başar 01:35:14.
[25] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 129.

While I perform my art, the meaning is crucial: the more I am in love with the meaning, the better I perform. I would not put the same effort in writing an ordinary sentence.'[26] Also according to Hasan Çelebi the meaning of a calligraphic piece is more important than its aesthetic beauty, which has been compared by him to a garment adopted to beautify and convey the meaning. When I investigated the relationship between beauty and meaning during our interview, I asked to Çelebi whether in his opinion the beauty of a calligraphic piece is generated from its aesthetics or from its meaning. The following has been his answer:

> Beauty comes from both meaning and aesthetics, but we value the meaning. The reason why we perform calligraphy is to give a message with wisdom, in small portions. The meaning is the priority, but sometimes aesthetics is the priority. It is like human dressing, you can see some women putting on very elegant clothes, and everybody would look at them. Men would also want to be noticeable and in a good shape when they go to important meetings. They would dress in a very good way. We want to convey the meaning and the message of a verse, while presenting it in a very good way; so, the shape is also important. We want to bring the attention of the audience to the piece, in order to give the message. And we do that through calligraphic forms and compositions.[27]

Hence, Çelebi granted importance both to meaning and form, highlighting though that the final aim of calligraphers is to present the meaning and the message of their works. Since they regard the message as valuable, they try to present it in the best formal ways. Especially when the contents come from the Quran, calligraphers are willing to convey it in the most beautiful manners, within the limitations and creative possibilities that the words technically present: 'Before performing, we choose the verse and we look at the meaning. If it is a Quranic verse, then we particularly try to build a design which is convenient to that verse.'[28] Considering the elevated status of

[26] Özçay 19:05.
[27] Çelebi 48:55.
[28] Depeler brothers 20:38.

Quranic words, Fuat Başar stressed also the importance of characteristics such as readability, accuracy and only subsequently, aesthetics:

> Usually we write Quranic verses. It depends on the calligrapher, whether he would write a verse on a line or as a composition. Calligraphers must write those verses without any mistake. The artistic and aesthetic part is a secondary dimension. First accuracy, second aesthetics. Once we learn how the verse should be written, you can have different images in your mind about how to compose it and about the style you are going to use.[29]

Başar considerations reiterated those expressed by Çelebi and by the Depeler brothers, in terms of the ample choice of forms in which a verse can be presented and conceived, such as on a single line, or on a composition. However, he also stressed that the aesthetic dimension should never cloud readability and clarity. On the formal and aesthetical aspects of a calligraphic piece, Başar added that its attractiveness and charm are conferred by the concentration of the mind of the artist during the creative and technical work, and by the flow of emotions as well, emerging from the calligrapher's understanding and reflections on the meaning: 'The calligraphic experience consists in the synthesis between the concentration of the mind and the flowing of emotions coming from the words. That is what confers beauty to a piece.'[30]

Savaş Çevik reiterated the aforementioned ideas, giving priority on meaning over form, and again demonstrating that a calligrapher strives to create a composition that can successfully reflect the words portrayed:

> When I decide to perform calligraphy, the meaning of the text for me is undoubtedly very important. After choosing the text, I choose the style of calligraphy that would fit the meaning. After that, I try to find the composition that could go well with that style. My way of doing all of this happens in my daily life, not sitting at the table or thinking before writing. Sometimes, when I am outside and I am thinking, evaluating

[29] Başar 53:20.
[30] Başar 56:29.

> and re-evaluating about what I could compose, I even do not realise where I am. Sometimes, I realise that I went too far and that I am not in the place I wanted to go.[31]

Çevik interestingly added to our present investigation the element of the creative inspiration. Conceiving a suitable and appropriate form for a calligraphic creation may require considerable intellectual and creative exertion. Some calligraphers, as Mehmed Özçay for instance (see chapter three, section three), may attempt several possible compositions on paper with a pencil, others, as Çevik, may search for an inspiration within their daily life. In any case, the creative effort is always perceived as a sort of struggle. In the case of Çevik, the search for the appropriate form may be a totally absorbing experience, leading him to momentary states of complete detachment from reality.

Excessive emphasis has not been given by any calligrapher on the formal aspects underlying compositions and designs, notwithstanding their importance and the fact that hours, years and decades of constant training and practice are invested in achieving technical perfection. According to Hüseyin Kutlu, these technical aspects possess a secondary importance, and priority should be given to cultivating feelings of love which confer life and spirit to the art:

> Consider this lamp, you see it as perfect, but you try to switch it on and it does not propagate light. Then, what is the point of it, if you do not have light? You may see a perfect sink made of gold, but when you try to have water, there is no water. So, what is the purpose of it? Similarly, calligraphy is useless without love (*aşk*) and feelings (*gönül*). Without these, it is only ornament and form. Everybody says, 'oh this is beautiful!' seeing a piece of calligraphic art, but I say to them, 'see what it is in it, show me that it is not only a shape', but they cannot. The spirit (*ruh*), the spirit! The spirit is what is real. Instead of being on the surface of calligraphy, you have to go deep down in the ocean.[32]

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[31] Çevik 56:33.
[32] Kutlu 01:48:41.

As it has been demonstrated so far, the values of love, affection, respect, good manners, and spiritual understanding, are considered vital elements of the transformative calligraphic path. It is fair to mention that even if Kutlu emphasised love and feelings over technique, all the other calligraphers that I have interviewed mentioned the importance of sharing with people valuable words of wisdom, inspiration and guidance through their works. No one conceived his or her art as an empty formal exercise.

In connection with the aforementioned aim of conveying treasured spiritual meanings through the media of calligraphic art, Efdaluddin Kılıç provided stimulating reflections on the influence of form and meaning on the observers of a calligraphic piece. Kılıç mentioned that the contemplation of a work, when harmony has been successfully achieved between formal beauty and meaning, may deeply affect observers: 'calligraphy has the capacity of converting people, of changing them forever. Because at the beginning you deal with the forms of the letters, and later on you get into the meaning.'[33] He also referred to a sort of brightness or enlightenment that can be detected on the faces of observers, who may be affected by a spiritual understanding emerging from the aesthetical and intellectual experience:

> I think there is a connection between form and meaning, in the way they affect the heart of a person. There is a verse in the Quran saying that whatever people keep in their hearts, it is shown from their faces. *sīmāhum fī wujūhihim min athari al-sujūdi.*[34] Because of the respect they show to Allah, their faces come to be illuminated. You can see this kind of light in the persons looking at a calligraphic piece, because when you read calligraphy, you may become a person who looks to the world with a different eye, with a different understanding.[35]

The verse that Kılıç recited in Arabic is a portion from Q. 48:29: 'their mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration.' Among the interpretations of the verse presented by commentators, one can be understood as closest to Kılıç's views,

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[33] Kılıç 12:04.
[34] From Q. 48:29: 'their mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration.'
[35] Kılıç 13.01.

according to which the mark upon the faces is conceived as a spiritual light resulting from feelings of humility towards God.[36] Interestingly, concepts similar to these enunciated by Kılıç, have been articulated in the context of Persian calligraphy, as attested by Roxburgh, referring to a spiritual pleasure (*ḥazz-i rūḥānī*) and an eternal bounty (*fayḍ-i jāvidānī*) achievable during the contemplative experience of a calligraphic piece.[37] For Kılıç, the art experience may stimulate in the observer spiritual reflections leading to new understandings. This idea made me enquire on the nature of this power described as being able to change people, and to generate light in their countenance. In particular, I asked to him if the power that he sometimes saw operating in observers originates from the aesthetical beauty of calligraphy or from the meaning of the portrayed words. The following has been Kılıç's answer:

> The meaning of the words is more effective. But the forms of letters – after all the efforts of calligraphers and artists during a thousand and a couple of centuries – is something precious too. Letters became beautiful and good to look at. So, when you look at the text, sometimes you just read it, and you deal with the meaning only. But, sometimes, the text is so attractive because of the letters, because of the spacing, because of the composition and all of this artistic graphical beauty. But the meaning is much more effective than the form, because when I mentioned the enlightenment of the faces, I did not mean that you can have that only because of calligraphy. It is because of the meaning. It is because of a deep connection with the Creator.[38]

From his answer it is possible to gather that he considers meaning and form both important, especially in view of the artistic evolution and improvement achieved in the art through several centuries, something which Kılıç appreciates and towards which he shows a deep respect. Nevertheless, in his views what is able to establish a connection between the heart of the observer and the Creator, it is the meaning of the revealed Word. For this specific reason, Kılıç confessed to me that he cherishes the

[36] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1256.
[37] Roxburgh, 'The Eye Is Favoured', 280.
[38] Kılıç 14:20.

desire to share with people meaningful messages, and that this desire lead him to choose to follow the path of the art of penmanship:

> I am not writing or making my art pieces just because of their outer form, or because of the attraction they produce. When I pick up one of the texts, one of the verses, one of the traditions, whatever, I take it for its meaning. And I would like to share that meaning with people. That is why I am involved with calligraphy! Even if it happens that I make something very abstract, still there is always a meaning, and there is still a connection with a concept.[39]

As it can be evinced, the aesthetical dimension is always present and never neglected. However, also in cases where works possess a high level of abstraction or formal complexity, the desire of Kılıç is persistently to connect the observer to a spiritual, religious or moral concept. A very similar notion has been enunciated by Hüseyin Öksüz, when I asked to him what his aim in practicing calligraphy was: 'Firstly, I should say that my understanding of the art is to give a message above all. I seek for the message. When I consider a verse, a tradition, or a poem, meaningful and impressive, then I would like to share that message with people.'[40]

Kılıç declared, further elucidating the effect of calligraphic verses on the observer and the connection between form and meaning, that the art experience can be described not only in terms of aesthetical attraction or intellectual understanding, but also as a moment of full revelation and disclosure from the spiritual realm:

> A meaning may be revealed to your heart by a calligraphic composition. The Quran has been revealed a thousand and four hundred years ago, but the first time you read it, it is actually coming into your heart. So, the angel Jibrāʾīl is actually bringing it to you. In the same way, sometimes calligraphic compositions – depending on your mood, experience, and knowledge – may talk to you in a different way, sometimes revealing their formal beauty, sometimes conveying deeper meanings.[41]

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[39] Kılıç 19:07.
[40] Öksüz I 28:50.
[41] Kılıç 01:09:29.

A calligraphic piece can be thus sometimes a vehicle of personal revelation of the Divine Word to the heart of the observer. This experience may trigger, according to Kılıç, the process of enlightenment and proximity to the Divine depicted in the previous paragraphs. The calligraphic experience depends overall on many different factors, and its intensity and depth are correlated with the mental state, art and life experience, and with the intellectual and spiritual knowledge of the observer.

Finally, Ferhat Kurlu expressed overall the concepts and ideas shared by other calligraphers and which have been illustrated so far. However, he interestingly privileged the search for beauty in the hierarchy of values and dimensions underlying the calligraphic experience, which according to him encompasses beauty of vision, beauty of hearing, and lofty meanings:

> It feels really good to have a beautiful piece at the end. But we do not build a building like an architect. First there is the search for beauty. Once you see a calligraphic piece, it will reverberate in your ears and in your mouth, because the art of calligraphy is also about the phonetics of the words. For example, here it is written *bismillāh al-raḥman al-raḥīm*, once you see it, you read it and you say it silently or aloud with your mouth. And there is also an elevated (*yuksek*) meaning behind these words. Sometimes these words are counsels from Allah, sometimes they refer to the remembrance (*zikir*) of Allah. I am aware that there are very important messages on these pieces.[42]

Hence, the calligraphic experience has been described by Kutlu as a total experience comprising the visual and auditory spheres, and stretching to the intellectual and spiritual realms of guidance, wisdom and remembrance of the Divine.

7.3 The Meaning of Form: Analysis of Calligraphic Pieces

In some instances, calligraphic pieces may have been created not only to convey a specific meaning through the portrayed words, but also through the form that carries

[42] Kurlu 49:53.

those words. In those cases, three levels of meaning can be distinguished: the meaning of words, the meaning of form, and the interconnections between the two. In this section I will analyse two works, one from the eighteenth century and one from the twentieth century, and subsequently ten works by contemporary calligraphers, with the aim of visually displaying specific examples of how meaning, and meaning of form, can be deeply interrelated. Some works by Hamid Aytaç, Savaş Çevik, Ayten Tiryaki, Fatih Özkafa, Mehmed Özçay and Ferhat Kurlu will be taken into consideration.

Within the Turkish tradition, especially in the Sufi-Shīʿī *milieu,* the visual aspect of a calligraphic piece has been particularly emphasised. Aksel analysed religious images generated by the use of calligraphy, where invocations and prayers are fashioned in order to visually create mosques,[43] boats,[44] vases,[45] Mevlevi hats (*sikke*),[46] birds,[47] lions,[48] and the human figure.[49] More recent scholarly literature intelligently investigated the iconicity of Turkish calligraphy[50] and the relationship between content and form.[51] Within the Ottoman tradition numerous are the examples of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and pictorial calligraphic art pieces showing a strong correlation between form and meaning. The existence of those particular types of works has been attested to spread from Persia from the seventeenth century, reaching subsequently Turkey as well.[52] Several examples from the Ottoman heritage can be mentioned, such as a *basmala* in the shape of a stork,[53] a eulogy for an Ottoman sultan in the form of a peacock,[54] the Islamic profession of

[43] Malik Aksel, *Türklerde Dinî Resimler: Yazı-Resim* (Istanbul: Elif Kitabevi, 1967), 26–34.
[44] Aksel, 43, 67–70.
[45] Aksel, 44, 49.
[46] Aksel, 55–59.
[47] Aksel, 74–80.
[48] Aksel, 85–89.
[49] Aksel, 106–9.
[50] İrvin Cemil Schick, 'The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 53/54 (2008): 211–24.
[51] İrvin Cemil Schick, 'The Content of Form: Islamic Calligraphy between Text and Representation', in *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300-1600 CE)*, ed. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Jeffrey F. Hamburger (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 173–94.
[52] Aḥmad ibn Mīr-Munshī al-Ḥusaynī, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 3, no.2:132–33.
[53] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 111.
[54] Schimmel and Rivolta, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 54.

faith as a boat.[55] Within the Sufi-Shīʿī *milieu*, the calligraphic renditions of prayers and invocations directed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, in the shape of a lion, are extremely copious.[56] In particular, in the Bektashi-Alevi tradition it is possible to detect some anthropomorphic renderings too, for instance creating a human face or a full figure of a human being representing the Perfect Man (*insān-i kāmil*) with the combination of the names of the Prophet Muhammad and his family members.[57]

As an example of the aforementioned zoomorphic calligraphies, a beautiful calligraphic panel, portrayed at the end of the eighteenth century and found in a Bektashi convent in Turkey, clearly displays a perfect harmony of meaning and form (Figure 7.1).[58] The visual calligraphic work exhibits a passage from the *dīwān* of the Persian Sufi Farīd al-dīn ʿAṭṭār (1145-1221): 'It is not everybody's sake to kill the evil soul in the body; to cut (text: "I cut") into pieces the serpent in the cradle is the work of Haidar.'[59] Text and image work together on multiple levels, representing the control, or destruction, of the lower soul full of passion and desires embodied by the serpent, by the strength of the lion (*ḥaydar*). The lion may simultaneously represent the higher aspects of the human being, such as the intellect or the spirit, and the historical figure of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, always metaphorically referred to as a lion, because of his courage and strength in battles. Thus, from a Shīʿī perspective, the overcoming of the inner evil may take place only through the intercession of the Imām.[60]

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[55] Annemarie Schimmel, 'Calligraphy and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey', in *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, ed. Raymond Lifchez (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), fig. 12.4.
[56] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 113; Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, figs 11–12; Pedram Khosronejad, ed., *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 104–48.
[57] Aksel, *Türklerde Dinî Resimler*, 106–9; Schimmel, 'Calligraphy and Sufism', fig. 12.2.
[58] Schimmel, 'Calligraphy and Sufism', 247.
[59] Translation by Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 31.
[60] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 157.

Figure 7.1 *Calligrapher unknown: Lion killing the serpent, Turkey, 1796-97. After Schimmel, Calligraphy and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey, 247.*

Another example connected to Sufism, but written by a non-Sufi calligrapher, is an invocation to Rūmī penned by Hamid Aytaç in the form of a Mevlevi turban (*sikke*): *yā ḥaḍrat-i mawlānā muḥammad jalāl al-dīn* (O [you filled with God's] Presence, our master Muḥammad Jalāl al-Dīn) (Figure 7.2). The dervish Mevlevi *sikke* is a conical hat made of felt, often of camel colour. 'Novices, who complete the 1001-day Mevlevî *çile* (initiation) take on the epithet "Dede" and their *sikke*s are wrapped with *destar*, or sash'[61] usually of green colour. That is the type of turban which can be seen as an abstract form in Aytaç's artistic creation. At the top of the turban, symbol of the Presence of the master Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, is written: *qaddasanā allāhu bi-asrārihi* (may God sanctify us by means of his secrets), which may refer simultaneously to the Secrets of the Divine and to the secrets uncovered by the master Rūmī in his teachings. Hamid Aytaç wrote this outstanding work in *celî sülüs* on a radiant blue and golden background, where the letters *yā* and *nā* have been elongated and connected together at the top, forming the image of the Mevlevi hat.

[61] Isin, *Saltanatın dervişleri dervişlerin saltanatı: İstanbul'da Mevlevilik (The dervishes of sovereignty, the sovereignty of dervishes: the Mevlevi Order in Istanbul)*, 198.

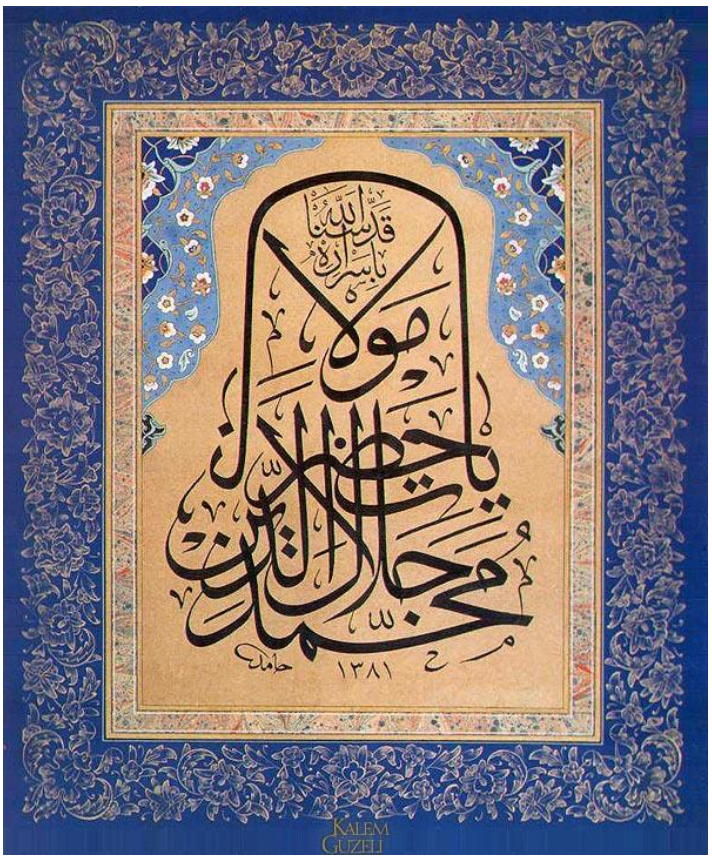

Figure 7.2 *Hamid Aytaç: Yâ Hazret-i Muhammed Celaleddin Mevlânâ, Turkey, 1961-62. © www.kalemguzeli.org.*

Some of the greatest calligraphers of the Ottoman tradition, such as Sâmi Efendi (1837-1912), Mehmed Hulûsî Efendi (1869-1940), and Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801-1876), depicted, among their works, invocations addressed to Rūmī, usually using the Persian inspired style *celî tâ'lik*.[62] A beautiful work by Mehmed Şefik (1819-1880) portrays exactly the same invocation, but evoking the shape of a dancing dervish.[63] Mustafa Râkım Efendi (1758-1826) wrote the invocation on a coloured pictorial panel, where the words have been written within the painting of a Mevlevi turban, rather than creating the shape of a turban.[64] Therefore, Aytaç continued the tradition of his Ottoman masters and predecessors, and today calligraphers such as Hüseyin Öksüz are persevering in the creation of

[62] Isin, 152–57.
[63] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, *Sakıp Sabancı*, 275.
[64] Tanındı, Kilercik, and Ölçer, 292–93.

panels addressed to Rūmī, often in the shape of a turban.[65] Numerous examples of poems of Rūmī, or the invocation portrayed at Figure 7.2, rendered in the shape of a whirling dervish can be purchased at the Bazar of Istanbul, often not exhibiting an excellent quality in the calligraphic trait.

During the interview I had with Savaş Çevik, he explicitly expressed how meaning and form can be noticeably connected in a calligraphic piece, using one of his works as an example (Figure 7.3). The panel portrays in a graceful *celî dîvânî* the words *al-rizq ʻalā allāh* (God is the One Who provides bounty).

Figure 7.3 *Savaş Çevik: al-rizq ʻalā allāh, Turkey, 2002-03. © Savaş Çevik.*

The word *rizq* can be translated as sustenance, provision, means of livelihood, life, bread, and it is mentioned in the Quran, conveying the idea that every creature, in

[65] Mustafa Çıpan, ed., *Hattat Hüseyin Öksüz Konevî* (Konya: Valiliği il Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2011), 90, 107.

this world and in the next one, receives provision from God.[66] The Divine Name *al-Razzāq*, the Oft-Provider, according to al-Ghazālī refers to the fact that God is the One Who created beings, their means of sustenance, and the ways beings can enjoy those means of sustenance, which are both corporeal and spiritual, that is, they nourish bodies and hearts.[67] Explaining the connection between these meanings and the shape of the calligraphic panel, Savaş Çevik conveyed the following:

> I have done this composition, I am sure you can read it. A person who does not know how to read Arabic, would only see something similar to a circle, maybe he would consider it just as a nice ring-shaped work. It does not have a meaning at all for that person. When we uncover the meaning of it, which is God is the One Who provides bounty (*al-rizq ʻalā allāh*), its form becomes meaningful. A person who was visiting a calligraphic exhibition watched it for a long time – that person knew Ottoman and Arabic, so he knew what it means – and then he turned to me and he congratulated with me, saying that the implications of the shape, and the meaning of the words, are deeply matching. This shape is like a womb of a mother, and the meaning matches with that shape. The second meaning is connected to a loaf of bread. So, this calligraphic piece has a certain spirit that you can grasp once you realise how the shape matches with the meaning of the words.[68]

The two forms that Çevik had in his mind when he created this work, refer to the bodily and spiritual dimensions. The more straightforward interpretation, that is, seeing the work in the shape of a loaf of bread, clearly connects the Quranic ideas of God as the Provider and Sustainer of every creature. The shape of the womb of a mother offers the idea of a Divine loving feminine nature, always nurturing, caring and providing sustenance in multiple unfathomable ways.

A work penned by Ayten Tiryaki further highlights the relevance of the feminine nature. Tiryaki explicitly pointed out one of her works, after our interview, explaining to me the meaning behind the creation of her panel (Figure 7.4). The composition written in *celî sülüs* on marbled paper, renders the words from the

[66] See, for instance, Q. 11.6; 19:62; 42:19.
[67] Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 78–79.
[68] Çevik 44:04.

tradition attributed to Prophet Muhammad: *al-jannah taḥta aqdām al-ummuhāt* (Paradise is under the feet of the mothers).

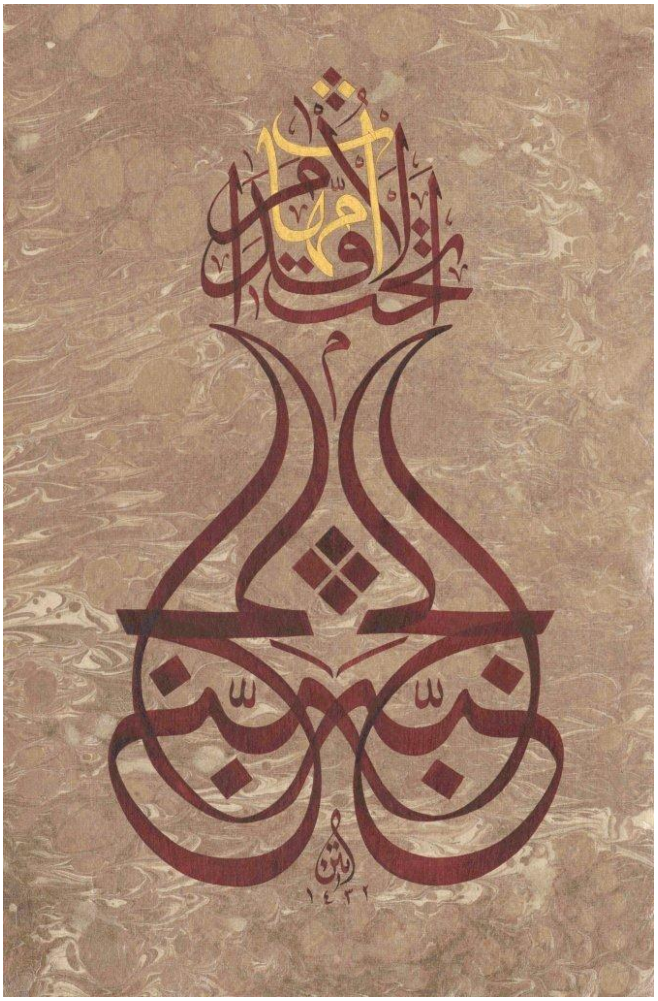

Figure 7.4 *Ayten Tiryaki: al-jannah taḥta aqdām al-ummuhāt, Turkey, 2010-11. © Ayten Tiryaki.*

Tiryaki revealed to me that in her composition she exposed on a visual plane the meaning of the tradition. The word *al-jannah*, Paradise, has been beautifully written in a mirrored (*müsenna*) style at the bottom of the panel, suggesting the image of a pair of abstract feet. The rest of the tradition has been written at the top, in a layered *istif* composition, where the word *ummuhāt*, mothers, has been written in a balanced flawless way using golden ink, conferring even more emphasis to it. The panel literally represents the meaning of the tradition on a spatial and visual plane.

Three works by Fatih Özkafa show the connections between meaning and form not only on a visual plane, but also encompassing a rich symbology and

numerology. When I asked Özkafa if he does usually consider the numerological and symbolic values of letters during the creative process of his works, the following was his answer: 'Yes I do. For instance, in this work these *wāw*s symbolise the circumambulation of the *Kaʿba*. All are in different colours, representing the different races of the humankind. And there is a numerological value behind every aspect. I can show you other works.'[69] We subsequently visited his studio where he showed to me his collection of books, the room with the table where he daily practices calligraphy, his tools, and his works, explaining in particular to me the symbology behind three of them. Since we left the room where I had placed my recorder and we toured several rooms of his workshop, I was not able to record his explanations, which I detailed in my notes only. Nevertheless, Özkafa consistently posted on his Facebook public account the same interpretation which has been provided to me.[70] The complex and marvellous work he elucidated in great depth has been named 'the stupendous *Kaʿba* and the circumambulation' (Figure 7.5), of which he created two versions with different colours.

[69] Özkafa 27:12.
[70] See his post on 23 September 2015, on facebook.com/fatih.ozkafa.

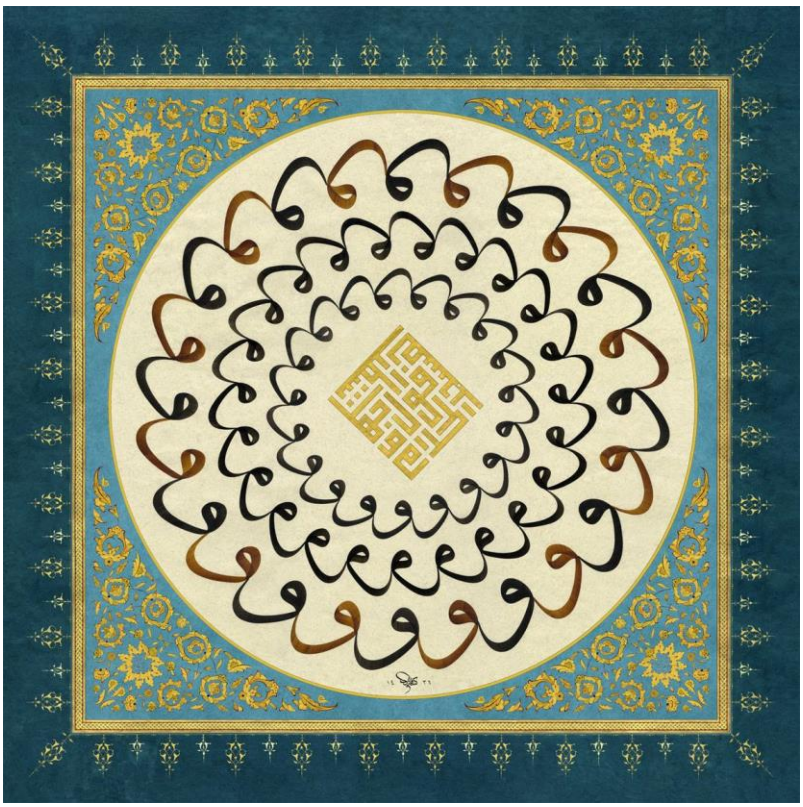

Figure 7.5 *Fatih Özkafa: Kâ'be-i Muazzama ve Tavaf, Turkey, 2009-10, 100 x 100 cm. © Fatih Özkafa.*

At the centre of the composition, in a forty-five degrees golden dot of light, we find a part of the Quranic verse 2:149 written in square Kufic, 'So turn thy face toward the Sacred Mosque' where the *Kaʿba* is intended. The decision of writing that particular verse in Kufic exalts the connection between the squared style and the cubic religious edifice. Around the verse representing the *Kaʿba*, three rings of letters *wāw*s can be seen, written in a dynamic *sülüs* and creating a sense of movement. In the first ring nineteen letters *wāw*s can be counted, representing the nineteen letters of the *basmala*. In the second ring we find twenty-three *wāw*s, representing the twenty-three years of the prophetic mission of Prophet Muhammad. In the third ring, there are twenty-four *wāw*s, representing the twenty-fourth verse from the *sūra* of Pilgrimage: 'And they shall be guided unto that which is good in speech, and be guided unto the path of the Praised' (Q. 22:24). The total number of the *wāw*s in the three rings (nineteen plus twenty-three plus twenty-fourth) makes sixty-six, representing in *abjad* both the word *Allāh* and the word tulip (*lâleh*), respectively symbols of the religion of Islam and of the Turkish nation. The different colours of

the *wāw*s represent Muslims of every race and nation performing the pilgrimage. In my interpretation, the central point could be conceived as the Divine in its sublimity and simplicity, the One. Since the first ring represents the *basmala*, it may refer to the revealed Word, and to Divine mercy and compassion encompassing all, the first manifestation and emanation from the Source. The second ring represents Muhammad, or the stage of prophethood, sign of Divine mercy and guidance on earth. The third ring represents the believers who do good following God's revelation, through the guidance of His prophets. Özkafa's reference to the existence of different races, reminds of the verse: 'O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware' (Q. 49:13). The fact that according to Özkafa all the letters together represent God, may induce to think that His Word, His prophets, and His creatures are all united by the pervading force of Divine mercy and creativity, since He is described as the Uniter (*al-jāmiʿ*), and the All-Encompassing (*al-wāsiʿ*).[71]

Another work representing and connecting the words *Allāh* and *lâleh* (tulip), has been named *lā ilāha illā'llāh* (there is no god but God), first part of the Islamic declaration of faith, referring to the concept of *tawḥīd*, the Unity of God (Figure 7.6).

[71] Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 116, 142–43.

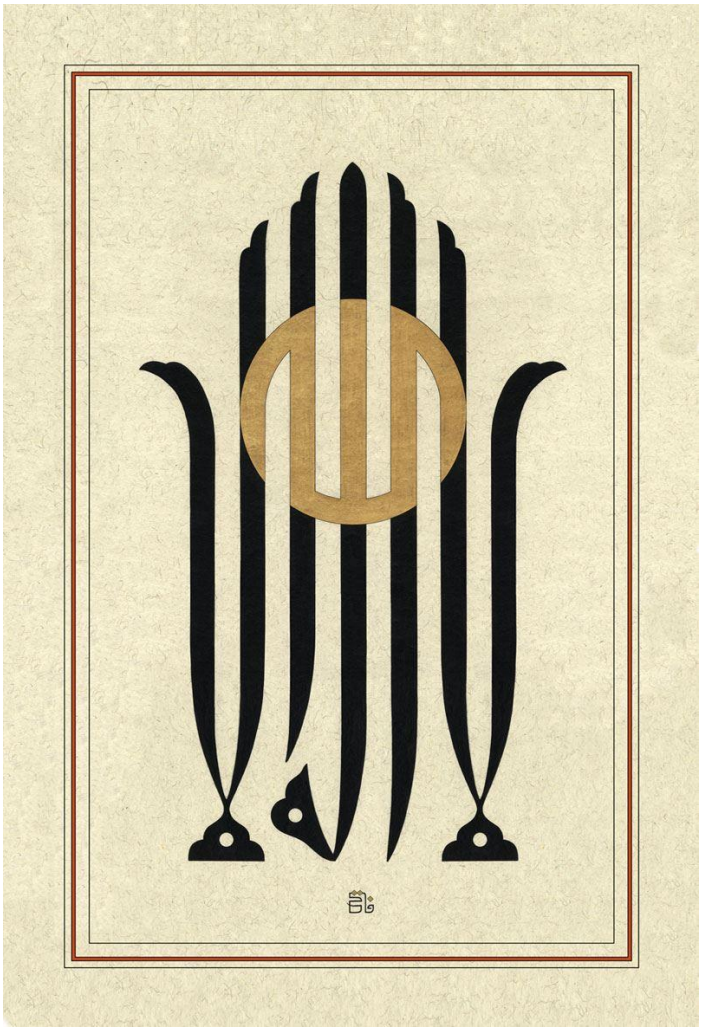

Figure 7.6 *Fatih Özkafa: lā ilāha illā'llāh, Turkey. © Fatih Özkafa.*

The Arabic word *Allāh* (الله) and the Ottoman Turkish word *lâleh* (لاله), are written with the same letters in a different order, hence their numerical value is the same, equal to sixty-six.[72] The *abjad* numerical computation, letter by letter, of the first word is equal to one, plus thirty, plus thirty, plus five, while the numerical computation of the second one is equal to thirty, plus one, plus thirty, plus five.[73] In this work the correspondences between meaning and form are functioning in two different directions. At the level of meaning, in the art piece the whole sentence *lā ilāha illā'llāh* is written with the same letters used in *Allāh* and *lâleh*. The word

[72] Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 261.
[73] For a full table of Arabic letters and their numerical value, see Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, xiii–xiv.

Allāh appears also in gold at the centre of the composition, where the calligrapher highlighted some sections of the letters used in the sentence, letting emerge another word superimposed on the declaration of faith. At the level of visual representation, the panel suggests the abstract form of a tulip, having the same numerical value of the pivotal centre of the composition, which is the word *Allāh*. In terms of the alternating usage of black and golden colours, the work evokes the famous *basmala* penned by Ahmed Karahisârî (1470–1556) in Kufic.[74] Furthermore, Özkafa's art piece may also visually remind to the image of stylised prayers hands, which in my interpretation allude to the proclamation of the Unicity of God performed during the ritual prayer.

The work titled *Esmâü'l-Hüsnâ* (the Beautiful Names of God), by Özkafa shows a connection between a geometrical form and its symbolic meaning (Figure 7.7).

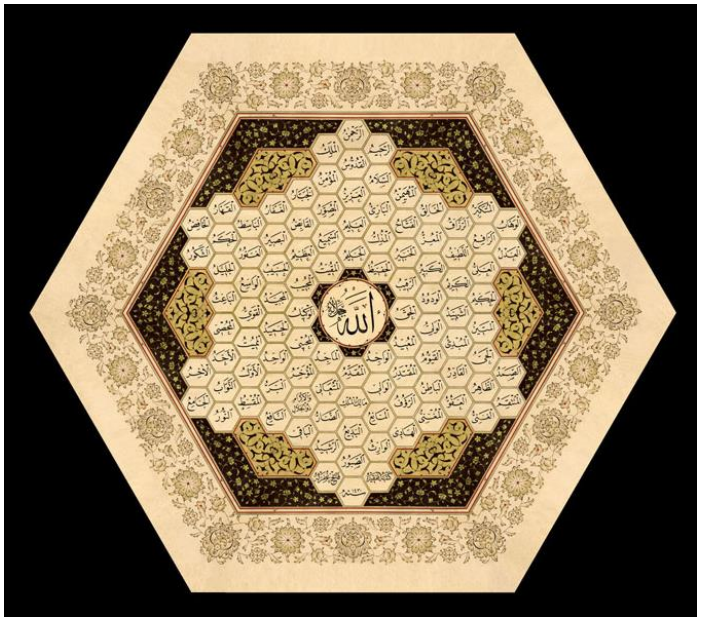

Figure 7.7 *Fatih Özkafa: Esmâü'l-Hüsnâ, Turkey. © Fatih Özkafa.*

The work displays the Ninety-Nine Names of God within a hexagonal frame. At the centre of the calligraphic work, there is the name *Allāh* written in *sülüs* and inscribed

[74] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 494–95.

in a circle. A series of multiple hexagons surround the circle all around, pointing to six directions. Within every small hexagon, a Name of God is written in *nesih*. It has already been pointed out that for Özkafa the number six possesses a specific meaning, since it denotes in *abjad* the letter *wāw*, symbol of unity (*waḥdat*) and of the Divine.[75] Hence, the calligrapher decided to represent the Unity of God and all of His Names and Attributes through a form pointing to a letter symbolising Divine Unity and Oneness (*tawḥīd*).

A work by Mehmed Özçay demonstrates that sometimes the connection between meaning and form may be based on a simple single element, such as the choice of the ink colouring. The work is centred on a quality highly exalted by calligraphers: patience. On Indian paper Özçay wrote a section of the verse Q. 12:83, '*fa ṣabrun jamīlun*' (beautiful patience!) in red ink and using the *celî sülüs* style (Figure 7.8).

Figure 7.8 *Mehmed Özçay: fa ṣabrun jamīlun, Dubai, 2003, 43 x 55.5 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

[75] Özkafa 22:40.

Özçay himself explained the circumstances behind the creation of this piece in his book:

> It is related in the Quran that when the bad news about Benjamin was brought by his brothers to Jacob (pbuh) following that of Joseph, he was deeply saddened, said '*fa ṣabrun jamīlun*' (so patience is most fitting [for me]), and turned away his face. Jacob (pbuh) remembered the grief he had felt for Joseph, and his eyes were blinded from pain and sorrow. As I was reading the Qur'an on the 10th of Shawwal 1424 (4 December 2003), after morning prayers, upon reaching this verse I wondered if I could create a composition for it. I finished reading the chapter, excitedly returned to my workshop, and worked on the composition. My first attempts yielded favourable results. When I wrote the panel, I used Indian red ink to allude to the grief felt by Jacob (pbuh).[76]

It is interesting to highlight the dimension of prayer and reflection emerging from his words. His artwork turned out to be the result of his meditations on the Quran, and the decision behind the use of the red colour, symbolising blood and grief, is counterbalanced by the Quranic words, which may confer a sense of acquiescence, acceptance of difficulties, and subsequently strength, to the reader.

The work by Mehmed Özçay portrayed in figure 7.9 is a beautiful and elegant example of how form can exalt and emphasise the meaning of the words. The work displays a portion of the verse Q. 9:40 written in *celî sülüs*: *wa kalimatu'llāhi hiya'l-ʿulyā* (the Word of God is the highest, which Özçay translates as 'the word of Allāh is exalted to the heights'[77]).

[76] Özçay, *Spoken by the Hand, Heard by the Eye*, 124.
[77] Özçay, 108.

Figure 7.9 *Mehmed Özçay: wa kalimatu'llāhi hiya'l-ʿulyā, Dubai, 2001, 13 x 33 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

Describing the relationship between meaning and composition in this art piece, Özçay affirms the following:

> I had tried many times to arrange this verse from the Holy Qur'an into a composition, but my efforts had not produced a satisfactory result. Finally, I thought of writing it on a sheet of Indian handmade paper that gave me the impression of a cloudy sky. I chose to use diluted ink to suggest the reflection of this simple arrangement in the luminosity of the sky. The illuminated ground is inspired by the stars.[78]

The paper provides a sense of luminosity, enhanced by the illumination which elegantly mirrors stars and clouds. The ink seems to emerge translucid and luminous from the piece, emphasising the concept of the Word of God as a translucent, subtle and sublime reality, encompassing the sky and all the existing things below it.

The last work by Özçay which will be taken into consideration underlines how the use of space may accentuate the meaning of a calligraphic panel (Figure 7.10). The work portrays a portion of the verse Q. 57:4: *wa huwa maʿakum ayna mā kuntum* (and He is with you wheresoever you are).

[78] Özçay, 108.

Figure 7.10 *Mehmed Özçay: wa huwa maʿakum ayna mā kuntum, Qatar, 2003, 45 x 73 cm. © www.ozcay.com.*

The words in deep green at the centre of the composition (and He is with you) have been written in *celî sülüs*, as the words written in deep black in a layered *istif* composition (wheresoever you are). These last words have been written in *nesih* all over again, and all around the central words, using a lighter brown colour and exhausting the available space of the composition. Thus, the words 'He is with you' have been emphasised by the use of a different colour and style, and the words 'wheresoever you are' have been continuously repeated, reinforcing, over and over again, the message of the verse.

A similar conceptual work can be detected in another work by Fatih Özkafa, written in three different styles (*muhakkak, dîvânî* and Kufic) depicting the analogous verse *fa aynamā tuwallū fa thamma wajhu allāhi* (wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God), portion of the verse Q. 2:115: 'To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-Encompassing, Knowing' (Figure 7.11).

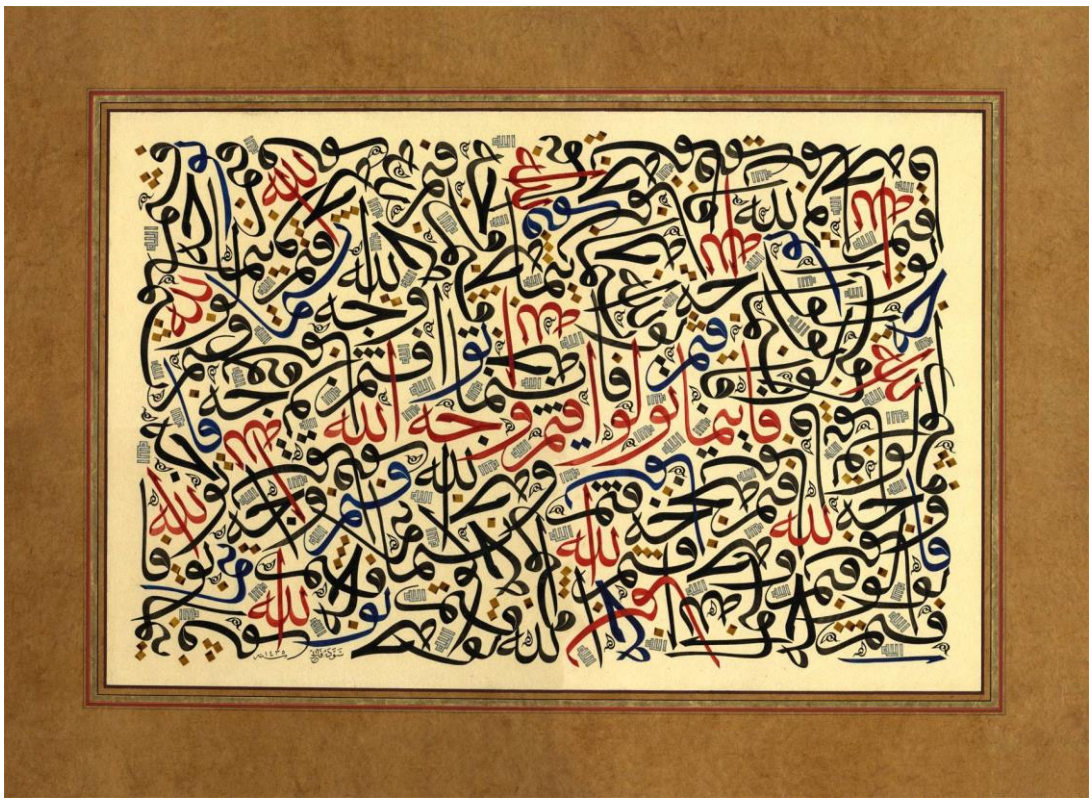

Figure 7.11 *Fatih Özkafa: fa aynamā tuwallū fa thamma wajhu allāhi, Turkey, 80 x 57 cm. © Fatih Özkafa.*

At the centre of the composition, and written in a red *muhakkak*, the verse can be clearly identified. Stressing the omnipresence of God, those words have been written all over again in different colours, in every direction, and in every portion of the piece. The composition visually recalls a *karalama*, and suggests the idea of a Presence which cannot be restraint, controlled or limited. The remaining part of the verse Q. 2:115, not written in its entirety in this art piece, provides an interesting interpretative key that is visually mirrored in Özkafa's work: as God has been described as the Possessor of East and West and as the All-Encompassing, so His words are ubiquitous on the composition's space. A detail of the work can reveal other fascinating aspects (Figure 7.12).

Figure 7.12 *Detail of the upper left section of Figure 7.11*

As it can be seen, the word *Allāh* has been written all over the composition in different calligraphic styles (*muhakkak, dîvânî* and Kufic) and colours (black, red, blue, grey), suggesting the idea that God manifests Itself in creation in manifold different forms, an aspect which recalls the conception of *waḥdat al-wujūd* mentioned by Özkafa during our interview.[79]

The last work that will be analysed in this final section has been penned by Ferhat Kurlu and it brings us back to the beginning of our journey, with the first verse from the sura of the Pen (Q. 68:1) analysed in chapter two: *nūn wa'l-qalam wa mā yasṭurūna* (*Nūn*. By the pen and that which they inscribe) (Figure 7.13).

[79] Özkafa 22:40.

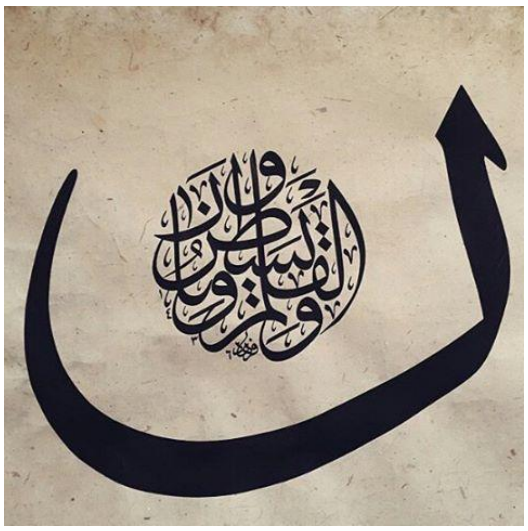

Figure 7.13 *Ferhat Kurlu: nūn wa'l-qalam wa mā yasṭurūna, Turkey, 2014-2015. © Ferhat Kurlu.*

The whole verse is contained in the dot of the letter *nūn*, so that the whole calligraphic work may be read as the very first letter of the verse portrayed. The dot symbolises the generative principle enclosing all the infinite potentialities of its actualities in multifold letters, and words, and sentences. The point is a symbol of beginning, but also of end, since all the manifested forms can be brought back to it. Hence, with the point of the *nūn* I now finish my intellectual efforts.

Conclusion

In this chapter I provided the views of some calligraphers (Kutlu, Kurlu, Çevik and Başar) on the concept of beauty in the art of penmanship, understood by all of them as an act of originality, abstraction, and creativity. Calligraphy does not imitate nature, but it follows specific geometric proportions conferring harmony and balance to the script. Furthermore, the compositions are determined by the artistic creativity and originality of the calligrapher. I showed that Başar characterises beauty as reminiscence of the *pre-existential beauty*, experienced by the soul in the realm of Pre-Existence. For that reason, he described calligraphy as universal. I acknowledged differences in the perception of the art, conceived to be accessible only to a few knowledgeable people according to Çevik, or accessible to everyone according to Başar. The latter affirmed that beauty has also a moral dimension: the one who understands and experiences beauty does not desire to harm or destroy the beautiful

Divine artwork. According to Başar, beauty is a way to build peace and to experience happiness.

I subsequently unveiled the interpretations related to meaning and form in a calligraphic piece. According to the majority of the calligraphers I have interviewed, the meaning is the most valuable and precious aspect. The art of penmanship conveys through beautiful forms meaningful messages. Calligraphers aim to obtain an aesthetic effect, able to successfully convey the meaning, and strive to obtain excellence and perfection. I showed that Çelebi considers meaning and form as both important, confessing though that the intimate aim of calligraphers is to provide a noble message through their works, presenting it in the best formal ways. He described calligraphy as a beautiful garment. Kılıç expounded also on the effect that the observation of a calligraphic piece may trigger. He mentioned that sometimes a sort of brightness or enlightenment can be sensed on the observers. A calligraphic piece may generate a spiritual understanding or awakening, when harmony between form and meaning is efficaciously achieved.

I finally focused my analysis on some specific specimens of calligraphic art, highlighting thought-provoking interrelations between meaning and form. The form itself can become a carrier of meaning, enhancing and intensifying the visual power of the piece, and the deliverance of its meaning. I have analysed two works from the eighteenth and the twentieth century: one with a zoomorphic calligraphy, the other in the shape of a Mevlevi hat. I have subsequently taken under my analysis ten works penned by Savaş Çevik, Ayten Tiryaki, Fatih Özkafa, Mehmed Özçay and Ferhat Kurlu. I demonstrated how colours, shapes, styles, numerological connections, mystical allusions, the positioning of words within the composition, the meaning of geometrical forms, the type of ink used, the background of the piece, are all elements that contribute to the empowerment of the words they carry.

CONCLUSIONS

This work examined, through the use of a phenomenological perspective, the views of fifteen exponents of the Turkish calligraphic tradition on the spiritual dimension of their art. The main research question that has driven my study was: 'is calligraphy only a technical art, or does it engage the spiritual existential dimension?'

In order to answer the question above, I have interviewed the following contemporary Turkish calligraphers: Uğur Derman, Hasan Çelebi, Hüseyin Kutlu, Savaş Çevik, Fuat Başar, Hüseyin Öksüz, Mehmed Özçay, Efdaluddin Kılıç, Ayten Tiriyaki, Ferhat Kurlu, Hilal Kazan, Fatih Özkafa, Aburrahman and Seyit Ahmet Depeler. I subsequently added to the list of my participants Soraya Syed. I included her in my study in order to provide an example of a calligrapher who has been trained within the Turkish tradition, but who lives in the United Kingdom, the country where this academic work has been written. I have identified seven themes, which emerged from the interviews I have conducted, and from the interactions I had with my participants. These themes led me to distribute the analysis in seven chapters, devoted to the exploration of (i) the historical and the artistic heritage of contemporary Turkish calligraphers; (ii) the implements used in the art and their symbolism; (iii) the elementary forms of the art of penmanship – the point, the letters, and the words – and their symbolism; (iv) the relevance of the body, and of dreams; (v) the conception of calligraphy as a spiritual and moral path; (vi) the perception of calligraphy as remembrance and worship; (vii) the exploration of the notion of beauty, form and meaning. In this final section, I will showcase my findings on the aforementioned themes.

The development of Islamic calligraphy in Turkey, from its Ottoman past to the present, is characterised by a strong element of continuity, notwithstanding the critical phase experienced by calligraphers during the early years of the Republic. From the Anatolian Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520), the originator of the art, it is possible to trace an unbroken chain of transmission from master to disciple, within the tradition. The art started with the mystical visions of Şeyh Hamdullah, who

elaborated new styles in the art of penmanship during a period of spiritual retreat. This aspect confers to the Turkish calligraphic tradition a hieratic element, which is transmitted with the artistic lineage. After the Şeyh, the most important figures in the conveyance of the art have been Ahmed Karahisârî (1469–1556), Hâfiz Osman (1642–1698), Yesârî Mehmed Es'ad Efendi (d. 1798), Mustafa Râkım Efendi (1757–1826), Kâdiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876), Mehmed Şevki Efendi (1829–1887), and Sâmi Efendi (1838–1912). The masters of the nineteenth century, who taught in the important institution Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn (the Calligraphers' School), were all students of Sâmi Efendi. Among them, those who passed the knowledge of the art to the masters of the present days, were Ahmed Kâmal Akdik (1861–1941), Mehmed Hulûsî Yazgan (1869–1940) and İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (1873–1946). During the critical days of the rise of the Republic, calligraphy changed its status: from being an art patronised by the State, it became an art whose form of expression – the Arabic script – was banned. Masters such as Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı (1898–1964), Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976), Kemal Batanay (1893–1981), and Hamid Aytaç (1891–1982), continued to teach the art privately, with no support from the State. Some of the most accomplished calligraphers of the present days, assert with respect and honour to have learnt the art from Hamid Aytaç, who was the last master from the Ottoman era. The contemporary masters feel to be part of a living tradition, which joins their art and their lives with those of the masters of the past.

Calligraphic tools have been described as vehicles of the spirit, symbols and reminders of human origins, destiny, and death. The pen encompasses a rich symbology. Within the Islamic and Turkish context, the pen is seen as an entity created before creation, the instrument used by God to inscribe Destiny, the implement for propagating culture and knowledge. Practices and beliefs reported by Kutlu and Syed relate the pen to death: the pen's shavings are collected throughout the calligrapher's life, with the aim to kindle the fire that will warm up the water used to clean the corpse of the calligrapher. Moreover, numerous calligraphers plunge their pens in the ground of the tomb of Şeyh Hamdullah in Istanbul, in order to absorb the blessings of the master. The ink is seen as a symbol of knowledge, infused during the Ottoman times with the blessing of prayers. Today, the practice of smashing the material components of the ink, while chanting one of the Divine

Names, it has been kept in the school of Kutlu. The paper is considered to be sacred because it is perceived as a receptacle of writing, bringer of spiritual and secular knowledge.

The calligrapher traces the dot, the letters, and the words. Those forms possess a spiritual symbolism. All letters are constructed taking the point as the elementary unit of measurement of the script. The point (*nokta*) is thus a symbol of synthesis, *summa* of all knowledge, and of the dynamism of the universe. The letters (*harfler*) possess a very rich symbology in mystical literature, not accepted by the majority of my participants. Kutlu and Özkafa provided some interpretations of the letters *alif* (symbol of oneness and beginning) and of *wāw* (symbol of unity and completion). The practice of calligraphic exercise (*meşk*), starts with writing the prayer *Rabbi yessir,* central element in the art. After that, the practice proceeds from the *müfredat meşk* (exercises on letters and combination of letters) to the *mürekkebat meşk* (exercises of imitation of sentences). Mastered these stages, a calligrapher moves towards the elaboration of compositions.

The body assumes a central role in the process of assimilation of Quranic verses. Many calligraphers commit to memory the Quran, partially or completely. The constant calligraphic practice leads a calligrapher to absorb, and in that sense to embody, within the brain and muscular memory, the verses which are constantly practiced. Moreover, in calligraphers' perception, the contents of these verses should also be manifested in a good behaviour and proper manners. A student assimilates layers of bodily patterns, gestures, and postures, all expressed by the master and other calligraphers. The way a calligrapher behaves, communicates, and governs emotions, is considered to be relevant to the expected level of decency and decorum. Furthermore, the vigorous and challenging calligraphic training leads the practitioner of the art to acquire a high level of control of the body, strengthening in particular eyes and hands. Some calligraphers reported instances of healing during the practice of the art, experiencing a reduction of physical or mental distress. When the body is projected into the oneiric realm, calligraphers often experience to be trained by some masters of the past, as reported by Başar, Çelebi and Kazan. Moreover, some calligraphers received in dreams intuitions on how to execute technical calligraphic features, or on how to improve their works.

Calligraphy can also be seen as a path, requiring the development of moral virtues and qualities. I demonstrated the implications of the metaphor of the path in Islam, particularly equated, in Sufism, to an existential journey passing through pain, purification, transformation, change, and illumination. The relationship between a master and a disciple is extremely valued by calligraphers: the master is the one who leads the student through the arduous journey of technical and moral improvement. Their relationship has been described in terms of love, gratefulness, and respect. Through the master, the student is also associated with the heritage of the art. The calligraphic practice leads the student to develop virtues in relation to the self (such as patience and serenity), to other people (such as respect and sincerity), and to the Divine (such as *iḥsān*, *tevekkül*, *ilham*, *iman*, *fikr*). When the student is considered mature enough in the art, a master can confer the *ijāza*, the license to teach and sign the calligraphic artwork. The attainment of the license could be wrongly perceived as the end of the path. In calligraphers' perception the path should indeed continue, and the qualities that led to the achievement of the *ijāza* should be endlessly cultivated. Moreover, the study of a new calligraphic style pushes the artist to start the training from its beginning. I have demonstrated how the chain of transmission (*silsila*) is considered important by calligraphers for the perpetuation of the art, and how it contextualises a calligrapher within the Ottoman heritage. The main responsibility after the attainment of the license, consists in perpetuating the tradition.

One of the aims of the art is to help people remembering the Divine. Multiple examples exist of works that focus on the remembrance of God, through the representation of Divine Names, the *basmala*, and Quranic verses which portray the Nature of the Divine, such as the verse of Light. As a sign of love for the messenger, the *hilye* is specifically devoted to the description of Prophet Muhammad. Calligraphy has been described as a form of worship. I have demonstrated that the calligraphic production is also constituted by prayers, invocations, supplications, or verses from the Quran revealed in the form of prayers. All my participants expressed the desire to be in a state of purity, specifically while writing the Quran. Some perceive calligraphy as similar to an act of worship, others consider the act of writing itself as worship.

In the final chapter, I provided the views of Kutlu, Kurlu, Çevik and Başar on the concept of beauty in the art of penmanship, understood by all of them as an act of non-imitation of nature, abstraction, and creativity. The art is based on specific geometric proportions, conferring harmony and balance to the script. Başar characterises beauty as reminiscence of the *pre-existential beauty*, experienced by the soul in the realm of Pre-Existence. Beauty may have also a moral dimension: the one who meditates on beauty does not desire to destroy the beautiful Divine artwork, consisting in nature, other creatures, and other human beings. According to Başar, calligraphy is a way to increase peace. I subsequently unveiled calligraphers' interpretations on the relationship between meaning and form of calligraphic pieces. According to these interpretations, the meaning is the most treasured aspect. The perceived aim of the art of penmanship is to convey, through attractive forms, meaningful messages. Çelebi describes calligraphy as a beautiful garment, and he believes that harmony between form and meaning should be efficaciously achieved. The observation of a calligraphic piece may trigger in the observer a new spiritual understanding, according to Kılıç, accompanied by a sort of brightness or luminosity perceivable in the observer's face. I finally showcased and analysed specific calligraphic pieces, highlighting the deep interrelations between meaning and form. In particular, I examined works by Çevik, Tiryaki, Özkafa, Özçay and Kurlu, where the form itself functions as a carrier of meaning, increasing and strengthening the visual power of the piece, and facilitating the transmission of its meaning.

The findings showcased above demonstrate that the art of calligraphy, within its Turkish contemporary traditional iteration, cannot be considered only as a formal and technical exercise. Calligraphy also involves several dimensions of being human, including being rooted in a cultural heritage, reflecting on death, upholding morals, worshipping the Divine. The fact that my research has been focused on spiritual aspects, has been very well received by all my participants. They have all demonstrated appreciation and satisfaction with my research and questions, as epitomised by the words of Kutlu:

> This is a very deep subject. I am glad that you brought these questions about spirituality and calligraphy. I am very glad to have you here. If you would have

> asked about the technique, or about how we create our works, it would have been very easy to answer, but it would not have been as interesting and important.[1]

He later emphasised, again, that my research is very important, and that no scholar, even from Turkey, pointed out to the above topics before.[2] Also Çelebi was pleased with my questions,[3] which both Derman[4] and Öksüz[5] defined as beautiful. Furthermore, Kutlu added that, in his perception, the present academic literature is focused on 'meaningless aspects', while the spiritual ones are the features which he considers as important.[6] Finally, Kurlu mentioned that in his views, these spiritual topics are not accessible to everyone, notwithstanding their importance. He hinted to the fact that I was able to understand the experiences and the notions that he conveyed to me:

> I think the only people who would understand these feelings related to experiencing and writing calligraphy, are either calligraphers or people who are knowledgeable about Islam. Sometimes a researcher comes from the West, and he is able to understand that too.[7]

Thus, addressing all the issues that have been analysed in this work, it was a much-needed task to be accomplished. The academic scholarly literature presented a gap that needed to be filled. Contemporary calligraphers expressed the sentiment that

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[1] Kutlu 07:59.
[2] 'What you are doing is really important, even in Turkey, since academic scholars do not point to this topic.' Kurlu 15:57.
[3] 'Thank you for your questions, I am happy that you came here and you have found me. Once you finish you are thesis, please send me a copy of it.' Çelebi 01:18:44.
[4] 'You asked many beautiful questions that became answers. Your questions inspired me, and were fulfilling for me. Thanks to you, many memories came into my mind.' Derman 51:46.
[5] 'Your topic is seriously great. You are well prepared, and the questions that you have asked are beautiful.' Öksüz II, 19:51.
[6] 'I am very happy, because most of the academic works concerning calligraphy are about meaningless aspects, for example they say how many calligraphic pieces Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi wrote, and in what styles, but the authors do not understand what is the spirit of the art. It is possible to write a whole thesis on spiritual important topics, like the meaning of *elif*, or the meaning of the name of Allah, or on the *basmala*; you can write a whole thesis just about these subjects. In Turkey, people do not care about spirituality anymore, or about the origins of calligraphy, and I am very glad to have had you here investigating these topics, not even from Turkey, but from Scotland. I am very grateful.' Kutlu 01:54:12.
[7] Kurlu 33:02.

their art needs to be studied not only as a technique, but also as a manifestation of a culture, together with its spiritual values.

The present work opens the way to other possible future researches, which I envision to move towards two main directions, that is, towards the past or towards the present. First, archival research could be carried out, with the aim to discover Ottoman manuscripts and calligraphic treatises which engage some of the aspects emerged in this study. This could allow to trace fractures and continuity within the tradition. Secondly, another direction of possible future researches moves towards the present: applying the same methodology that I have been carried out, the relevance of spirituality could be investigated in the modern abstract stream of calligraphy. Such a research could allow to determine how different, or how similar, the traditional and the modern streams manifest themselves in reference to spirituality. Furthermore, the work of other disciples of Hasan Çelebi, such as Nassar Mansour in Jordan, Fuad Koichi Honda in Japan, and Mohamed Zakariya in the United States, could be analysed assessing the innovation they bring within the Turkish calligraphic tradition. Finally, the full material that I have collected during my fieldwork, in the form of recorded or transcribed interviews (reaching the amount of around fifty-five-thousand words in total), could be possibly made available to interested researchers for further studies in the field of Turkish calligraphy.

Hilal Kazan, at the end of the very last interview I have carried out in Turkey, asked to me a very interesting question. Having pursued a Ph.D., she is aware of the difficulties and of the challenges that a new research, based on new primary material, may present. Kazan asked to me how I was going to assemble all the different materials acquired from the interviews. Replying to her question, I mentioned to her that during my visit to the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, I experienced a moment of clarity and insight. While wandering in the mosque, my mind was focused on all the interviews carried out to that moment. At one point, looking at one of the beautiful arches of the mosque, I realised the importance of details. Usually, entering into a new mosque, the attention is completely caught by the dome. For instance, an observer may be attracted by its majesty, or by the beauty of the calligraphy on the dome. However, all the beauty experienced in the mosque, is based on the interaction and on the relationship between all the details that constitute the whole. Looking

carefully to the details of the Selimiye Mosque, I saw thousands of forms of different colour, and shape, revealed in multiple geometrical and floral decorations. Different elements and materials, such as wood, gold, marble, coloured tiny tiles, mighty pillars, were all intertwined creating the whole. At that very moment, I realised that in the interviews conducted with my participants, every calligrapher contributed in providing a different perspective, a different detail, and a different element in the reflection upon the subject discussed. I could see their different reflections and understandings of the art as elements of the whole; elements which are not in contradiction, but in relationship with each other. Some differed, some rhymed together, and all are parts of something bigger, something that I could metaphorically define as *the mosque of calligraphy*. If the reader experienced inspiration and insight while visiting this mosque, my efforts have not been wasted.

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THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
The Alwaleed Centre

The Spiritual in Islamic Calligraphy

In this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview to explore your spiritual and intellectual understanding of calligraphy and your art experience, drawing examples from your practice. The interview will take between 60 and 90 min and will be recorded with a digital voice recorder for later transcription. Extracts from the interview transcript may be published as part of the study.

You have the right to omit or refuse to respond to any question that is asked you and you can leave the study, or request a break, at any time during the interview.

This study is conducted in accordance with British Psychological Society, and the PPLS departmental ethics guidelines. Your rights as a participant, including the right to withdraw at any point without providing a reason, are ensured. You can ask that any data you have supplied be withdrawn or destroyed up to 31th March 2015.

There are no known benefits or risks for you in this study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and no compensation is offered for participation.

It is anticipated that the findings of the study will be written up in standardised journal format.

If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, please ask the researcher before the study begins.

Researcher's contact details:
Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari
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APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Spiritual in Islamic Calligraphy

Name of participant:
Name of researcher: Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari

I consent to participate in this study and I am satisfied with the participant information I have been given about the study.

I have been informed that the data I provide will be safeguarded. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my art experience and my understanding of the art of calligraphy.

I have not been coerced in any way to participate in this study and I understand that I may terminate my participation in the study at any point without providing a reason.

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data that I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Participant's Name (Printed)

_____

Participant's signature Date

_____

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
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KATILIMCI BİLGİ SAYFASI – İslami Kaligrafide Spritüel

Bu çalışmada, sizden uygulamalarınızdan örnekler çizerek kaligrafi ve sanat deneyiminize ruhani ve fikri bakışınızı keşfetmeniz için bir mülakata katılmanız istenecektir. Mülakat yaklaşık 90 dakika sürecek olup daha sonra transkripsiyon için dijital bir ses kayıt cihazı ile kaydedilecektir. Mülakat transkriptinden alınan bilgiler çalışmanın bir parçası olarak yayınlanabilir.

Size sorulan soruları atlama veya cevaplamama hakkınız olup mülakat sırasında dilediğiniz zaman çalışmayı terk edebilir veya mola isteyebilirsiniz.

Bu çalışma İngiliz Psikoloji Topluluğu ve PPLS bölümsel etik kılavuzlarına göre gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sebep göstermeden dilediğiniz noktada geri çekilme hakkı da dâhil olmak üzere katılımcı olarak haklarınız garantilidir. 16 Eylül 2014 tarihine kadar sunduğunuz bilgilerin geri çekilmesini veya imha edilmesini isteyebilirsiniz.

Bu çalışmada sizinle ilgili hiçbir bilinen fayda veya risk bulunmamaktadır.

Bu çalışmaya katılımınız gönüllü olup katılımınıza ilişkin hiçbir tazminat sunulmamaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın bulgularının standart bir dergi formatında yazılacağı öngörülmektedir.

Bu bilgi sayfasının okuduktan sonra sorularınız olduğu takdirde lütfen çalışma başlamadan evvel araştırmacıya sorunuz.

Araştırmacının iletişim bilgileri:
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BİLGİLENDİRİLMİŞ ONAM FORMU – İslami Kaligrafide Spritüel

Katılımcının adı:
Araştırmacının adı: Francesco Stermotich-Cappellari

Bu çalışmaya katılmayı onaylıyorum ve çalışma hakkında tarafıma verilen katılımcı bilgilerinden memnunum.

Sağladığım bilgilerin korunacağı konusunda bilgilendirildim. Çalışma öncesinde ve sırasında dilediğim zaman soru sorma konusunda özgürüm.

Sanat deneyimim ve kaligrafi sanatına bakışım konusunda mülakata alınacağımı anlıyorum.

Bu çalışmaya katılma konusunda herhangi bir şekilde baskı altında bırakılmadım ve bu çalışmaya katılımıma dilediğim noktada sebep göstermeden son verebileceğimi anlıyorum.

Verilerin Korunması: Üniversite'nin verdiğim kişisel bilgileri işlemesini kabul ediyorum. Bu bilgilerin tarafıma açıklanan Araştırma Projesi ile ilgili maksatlarla işlenmesini kabul ediyorum.

Katılımcının Adı (Matbu)

_____

Katılımcının imzası Tarih

_____

APPENDIX D: TEMPLATE OF QUESTIONS

The Spiritual in Islamic Calligraphy

Calligraphic journey

1) When have you started your calligraphic journey and what is the name of your master? When have you received your *ijāza* and in what style(s)?
2) Do you think that studying calligraphy changed yourself as a person? Did it change your character or behaviour? If yes, how did it transform you?
3) Could you please share some examples or stories of what you may call 'spiritual training' received from your master? Could you please mention some spiritual teachings taught by your master?

Art experience

4) What do you think about when you practice calligraphy? In what kind of state is your mind? Could you please share some examples or stories of your inner state while writing calligraphy?
5) What do you feel emotionally when you practice calligraphy?
6) Would you consider practicing calligraphy as a spiritual experience? Could you please tell me some examples from your own experience in which your art performance could be described as spiritual?

Relationship with the religious dimension

7) Do you consider calligraphy as a kind of worship? Why and how?
8) Do you perform ablutions before writing Quranic verses? Why?
9) Would you consider calligraphy as a sacred art? If yes, how the Sacred manifests Itself in calligraphy?

10) What is in your opinion the legacy left by Sufism in Turkish calligraphy? How, drawing also from your own experience, did Sufism influence the Turkish calligraphic tradition?

Please, I would love to hear any other reflections you would like to share.
Thank you very much.